

# **DESCARTES AND THE CREATION OF THE ETERNAL TRUTHS**

A Thesis

by

CALE JOSEPH HARFOUSH

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

August 2006

Major Subject: Philosophy

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Approved by:

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## ABSTRACT

Descartes and the Creation of the Eternal Truths. (August 2006)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Stephen Daniel

Descartes' philosophy concerning the relationship between God and the eternal truths has been an unresolved and problematic issue since he first declared it. For Descartes, God's power is limitless and nothing can exist independently of Him. The problem is that if that is true, things such as "God knows that he does not exist" are possible because the truth of that proposition rests on God's power. In fact, the existence of any eternal truth depends on God's power. Examples of such truths are: "the interior angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles," " $3+4=7$ ," and "two contraries cannot exist together." Descartes built his entire metaphysics around a certain conception of God, a conception that includes His not being a deceiver. But if it turns out that God is as limitless as Descartes thinks He is, Descartes' philosophy does not rest on as firm a foundation as he believes. In fact, it is inconsistent: we know what we clearly and distinctly perceive because God would not deceive us and his power is unlimited. But since His power is absolutely unlimited, it might be the case that God is not a deceiver and everything we know is true, but at the same time we have been misled by God and there is an actual reality we are not, and will never be, privy to.

There have been a number of attempts to make Descartes' view consistent. I consider two of the most recent and promising lines of interpretation. The first, Universal Possibilism, holds that God's power is utterly limitless and He can make any proposition

true, including problematic ones such as “I think, but I am not.” This theory argues that what we can and cannot conceive are merely epistemic limits rather than indicators of truth. The second, Limited Possibilism, maintains that God has power over the possibility of any proposition. Any proposition, under this view, is possibly possible; this preserves the integrity of the connection between what we conceive as true and what is actually true. The major drawback to this line of thought is that it puts an unintuitive limit on God: He can make something possible, but he can’t then do the seemingly simple task of making that thing true. I argue that a proper understanding of Descartes’ conception of the meanings of “possible,” “impossible,” “contingent,” “necessary” and God’s nature renders his position consistent. Descartes holds that God necessarily exists, and his nature is immutable and the existence of anything else is contingent. If one interprets Descartes’ God to hold limitless power over contingent propositions, but not over his nature or existence, Descartes’ position is no longer inconsistent.

*For my mother, Joey Harfoush, who has given me love and support throughout my life.*

*For my father, Joseph Harfoush, to whose memory I have constantly tried to do justice.*

*For my grandfather, Ernest Saba, who inspired me to work hard and never give up.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I never expected to like the history of philosophy. Throughout my life, history has seemed stilted and lackluster; a drudge of memorization. Throughout the course of many conversations, both philosophical and personal, I have come to realize that the history of philosophy is an appealing and valuable effort. I can only imagine that the discipline of history itself is as rewarding at higher levels. I cannot thank everyone who has played a part in these conversations, but there are a few whom I must acknowledge.

First, I thank my family and friends for their support and encouragement during my entire academic career. I have relied upon them in the past and hope that I am able to continue to rely upon them in the future. Joey Harfoush, my mother, has always given whatever I asked for without a second thought and has shared in my sorrows and joys. Laura Morgan, my caring girlfriend, has perpetually inspired my spirit and has been an indispensable ally during the writing and editing process. My close friends, grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles unceasingly encouraged me to succeed and comforted me when I didn't; I am never without a cheering section.

Second, I must thank the graduate students, faculty and staff of our philosophy department at Texas A&M University. The sense of camaraderie that has developed breeds a fertile environment for both work and friendship. The faculty and staff unceasingly help any student who asks. Every door is always open for questions and conversations. It is no wonder that the graduate student environment is so friendly and supportive; we have an excellent model. The support I have received from my fellow students has helped me persevere through many of the difficulties I faced while working on this thesis. They have been a source of strength both in and out of the department. I

look forward to my career knowing that I will have these fellow philosophers with whom I share a special bond.

Finally, I thank Professors Stephen Daniel and Michael LeBuffe for all of their encouragement throughout the last two years. Without their help, I would never have realized how gratifying the study of modern philosophy is. Their instruction and advice have inspired and supported me throughout my entire learning process. Without them, none of this would have been possible.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Descartes' doctrine on the relation between God's power and the creation of the eternal truths has two main interpretations.<sup>1</sup> One of the most common interpretations holds that God's power is unlimited. He has absolute control over any proposition whatsoever. Some people uncomfortable with such an unmitigated characterization of God's omnipotence interpret His power another way. God has absolute control over only the possibility of any proposition whatsoever. The first interpretation, called Unlimited Possibilism, has the *prima facie* advantage of according most closely with Descartes' writings, especially his explicit characterization of God as a God who can do anything.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this reading also has the disadvantage of debasing the meaning of "possible" and undermining Descartes' most valued theories. On the other hand, Limited Possibilism, the second interpretation, has the advantage of maintaining the meaning of notions like "necessary" or "impossible" and thereby preserving the foundation of Descartes' physics, *cogito* and ontological argument. Regrettably, Limited Possibilism protects God's power over the possibility of a proposition, but at the cost of God's power over the truth of the proposition itself. The evaluation I offer finds the middle road between these two theories. I uphold God's power over both the possibility and truth of a given proposition, but preserve the meaning of possibility. Descartes holds that God's creation constitutes reality both for God and for us; there is no thing which can be

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This Thesis uses the *Chicago Manual of Style* format.

<sup>1</sup> I will use the following as my primary reference to Descartes' works: *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volumes 1 and 2, edited by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) [hereafter CSM]; and *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume 3, edited by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) [hereafter, CSMK].

<sup>2</sup> Margaret D. Wilson, *Descartes*. (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 120.

independent of God. If the notions of necessity and possibility are understood with this in mind and as Descartes defines them, Controlled Possibilism preserves the foundation of Descartes' works.

Descartes' doctrine regarding the relation between the power of God and the eternal truths is not specifically detailed in any one work. Instead, it is found in bits and pieces throughout his works, both published and unpublished, and his letters to various theologians, friends and scientists. Descartes' conception of a God that can do anything is an intuition shared by many even today, whether philosophers, theologians or lay people. If Descartes' texts are consistent and reliable, these people will have a firm foundation of reason on which to base their beliefs. Some philosophers have taken a derogatory attitude towards Descartes' overall writings because he lacks a definitive text that explains the relation between God and eternal truths that is consistent with all of his theories. Not only does Descartes' reputation suffer, but his most precious theories are called into question because of this seeming inconsistency in his reasoning. The problem is that if everything is possible because of God's power, there is nothing that is impossible. For each of Descartes' claims of certainty, the opposite is possible. Overall, Descartes' collected works builds a house with confused passages which deceive the mind with a conflicting maze of various wandering paths.<sup>3</sup> His creation doctrine is like Ariadne's thread: though we wander through a labyrinth, we emerge to see the entire edifice on a solid foundation.

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<sup>3</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 8.161.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CREATION DOCTRINE

Throughout his writings Descartes proclaims and asserts that all eternal truths depend on God. The earliest proclamation of this idea appears in a 1630 letter to Mersenne, while the latest is in a 1649 letter to More written one year before Descartes' death. In both of these letters, Descartes holds that the eternal truths depend on God, God can do everything Descartes conceives to be possible, and God can do more things than are encompassed within Descartes' thought. This doctrine is borne out not only in his letters, but also in his published writings (namely the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies to The Meditations*), and in *The World*, a work published only after Descartes' death. Three examples that embody the essence of this creation doctrine are found in the 8<sup>th</sup> Article of the 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies*, the 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne and the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland:

If anyone attends to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on him. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good.<sup>4</sup>

The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures. Indeed to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates. Please do not hesitate to assert and proclaim everywhere that it is God who has laid down these laws in nature just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible. The first consideration shows us that

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<sup>4</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies*, Article 8 (1641); CSM 2:293.

<sup>5</sup> Descartes to Mersenne, 15 April 1630; CSMK 22-23.

God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite. The second consideration assures us that even if this be true, we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so. And even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it. I agree that there are contradictions which are so evident that we cannot put them before our minds without judging them entirely impossible, like the one which you suggest: 'that God might have brought it about that his creatures were independent of him'. But if we would know the immensity of his power we should not put these thoughts before our minds, nor should we conceive any precedence or priority between his intellect and his will; for the idea which we have of God teaches us that there is in him only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure.<sup>6</sup>

These three passages are examples of the heart of the creation doctrine: the existence of any eternal truth whatsoever depends on God and His power is not limited. To speak of anything *not* depending on God is to speak of something independent of Him, which would restrict His power. It is clear that Descartes held that the eternal truths depend on God, but just how does he ground this doctrine? His doctrine is grounded by the following considerations: God wills all things by one creative act from eternity, God's will is immutable and unchanging, and God's will is free and completely indifferent, that is, there cannot be anything independent of God that inclines his will one way or another.

God creates everything, including the eternal truths, in one eternal creative act. In a sense, God is action. This is consistent with, indeed integral to, another part of Descartes' doctrine: that God is immutable. Were God not to create in one act but rather in more than one act, at some point He would have the property of having created some things, but not others. Then, after creating all things, his properties would change from not having created everything to having created everything. Hence, Descartes considers God to understand, will and create everything, all at once in one divine creative action:

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<sup>6</sup> 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland; CSMK 235.

And even his understanding and willing does not happen, as in our case, by means of operations that are in a certain sense distinct from one another; we must rather suppose that there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything. When I say ‘everything’ I mean all *things*: for God does not will the evil of sin, which is not a thing.<sup>7</sup>

Any given creative act accomplished by God is identical with any other act of creation, understanding or willing; God accomplishes all things in one act. The creation of the eternal truths is one of the things God accomplishes. Descartes held that these truths depend on God, so their essence is created in this one act along with everything else. This justifies the creation doctrine for three reasons: first, as noted, were it not the case that God created in one act, it would conflict with Descartes’ contention that God is unchanging. Second, if creation were more than one act, it is not so certain that the eternal truths would be eternal; it could be that God created some truths, and then afterwards, decided to create others. Finally, God’s will may not have been indifferent regarding the creation of the world: if the eternal truths were created first, God’s will would have been inclined to make the world a certain way given the force of the eternal truths. All of these considerations would dilute Descartes robust creation paradigm; a single creative act is fundamental to the establishment of the eternal truths.

The eternal truths are eternal because God willed them and his will does not change. God is unchanging and He continually preserves the existence of all creation; in fact, Descartes argues that were God to withdraw his concurrence, everything he has created would go to nothing. Descartes held both that God continually lent creation his concurrence, thereby ensuring our continued existence, and that God is unchanging:

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<sup>7</sup> *Principles of Philosophy* I. 23; CSM 1:201. Another example is found in his 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne: “In God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually” (CSMK 25-26).

It would not follow that anything can be kept in being without the influence of God, for truths may often be illustrated by a false example, and it is much more certain that nothing can exist without the concurrence of God than that there can be no sunlight without the sun. There is no doubt that if God withdrew his concurrence, everything which he has created would immediately go to nothing; because all things were nothing until God created them and lent them his concurrence.<sup>8</sup>

This passage clarifies that Descartes held that God continually and immutably preserves creation. Furthermore, Descartes holds that God does not change.<sup>9</sup> He does not specifically address the eternal truths, that is, he never specifically contends that God continually lends these truths his continual concurrence. However, it is reasonable to include the eternal truths along with everything else that God preserves for two reasons: first, the eternal truths are one of the things that God wills to exist; as such it follows naturally that he lends them his concurrence. Second, if the eternal truths did not depend on God for their existence, they would be independent of God; and Descartes clearly believes that to think of anything being independent of God is blasphemy.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the eternal truths must depend on God's will because His will is completely free. There is nothing prior to God's creative act we can consider, good or otherwise. Were there something prior to God's act to be considered, this would restrict his freedom and omnipotence. In the 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies*, Descartes shows that were not everything to depend on God, he would not have been indifferent with regard to creation:<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> August 1641, letter to Hyperaspistes; CSMK 193-94.

<sup>9</sup> "Hence we do not, strictly speaking, say that there are modes or qualities in God, but simply attributes, since in the case of God, any variation is unintelligible." *Principles of Philosophy* I. 56; CSM 1:211. For further examples, see the following passages: *Principles of Philosophy* I. 22, CSM 1:200; II. 36, CSM 1:240; II. 42, CSM 1:243; and the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Meditations*, CSM 2:33.

<sup>10</sup> 6 May 1630 letter to Mersenne; CSMK 24.

<sup>11</sup> A concise account of Descartes' definition of indifference can be found in his 9 February 1645 letter to Mesland: "I would like you to notice that 'indifference' in this context seems to me strictly to mean

As for the freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. I am not speaking here of temporal priority: I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of 'rationally determined reason' as they call it, such that God's idea of the good impelled him to choose one thing rather than another. For example, God did not will the creation of the world in time because he saw that it would be better this way than if he had created it from eternity; nor did he will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise, and so on. On the contrary, it is because he willed to create the world in time that it is better this way than if he had created it from eternity; and it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise; and so on in other cases.<sup>12</sup>

In both this instance and the arguments from Article 8 of the 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies* regarding the certainty that everything depends on God, we see that for Descartes, indifference is an indication of God's omnipotence.<sup>13</sup> If anything were to impugn his indifferent will, it would at the same time impugn his power. Given Descartes' conception of God's omnipotence, this grounds the creation doctrine: were God not to be the author of the eternal truths, there would be something independent of Him, so he would not be supremely indifferent and, hence, not be supremely omnipotent.

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that state of the will when it is not impelled one way rather than another by any perception of truth or goodness."

<sup>12</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies*, art. 6 (1641); CSM 2:293.

<sup>13</sup> Descartes states: "Thus the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence." 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies*, art. 6; CSM2:291.

## CHAPTER III

### UNIVERSAL POSSIBILISM

Universal Possibilism contends that Descartes is committed to the thesis that for any proposition, that proposition is possible. This contentious thesis states that there are no necessary truths whatsoever, for the contrary of any truth is possible; furthermore, the truth value of that proposition may change at any time. Proponents of this thesis interpret Descartes' God as "a being for whom the logically impossible is possible."<sup>14</sup> Gijsbert Van Den Brink refers to this interpretation as a special view of modality, there are neither necessary truths nor logical impossibilities.<sup>15</sup> He calls Universal Possibilism the extreme reading of Descartes' doctrine.<sup>16</sup> In this section, I will investigate what it is about Descartes' writing that motivates Universal Possibilism. I will also consider the recent development of Universal Possibilism by considering the thoughts of scholars who attribute it to Descartes. I will then present the main advantages of Universal Possibilism and, finally, consider some troubles with this idea as an interpretation of Descartes' doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths.

#### *Textual Grounding for Universal Possibilism*

Alvin Plantinga, who first coined the term "Universal Possibilism," has characterized the issue of the relation between God and the eternal truths as an issue of

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<sup>14</sup> Harry Frankfurt, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977): 44.

<sup>15</sup> In this paper, when I refer to modal propositions, I mean the possible, necessary or impossible status of those propositions.

<sup>16</sup> Gijsbert Van Den Brink, "Descartes, Modalities, and God," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 33 (1993), 3.



control.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, the supporters of Universal Possibilism have sensed the deeply theistic nature of Descartes' writings and seek to attribute to him a view commensurate with God having as much control as possible. They find in his metaphysical writings a trend that holds God as the author of all things and seek to ascribe to Descartes a theory that places God in supreme control of all things, including whether a given proposition is true. There are a few main passages that the supporters of Universal Possibilism look to in order to ground their interpretation. Unsurprisingly, they are passages in which Descartes uncompromisingly portrays God as having power with no limits, a God in control of all creation and limited by nothing.

Unambiguous proof that Descartes held God to be the supreme legislator of all things, including the eternal truths, is found in three principle texts: The earliest letters to Mersenne, the 8<sup>th</sup> Article in the 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies*, and a key letter to Mesland in 1644. In one of his earliest letters to Mersenne, Descartes puts forward the idea that God established the eternal truths by the same kind of causality with which he created all things, namely that God is the efficient and total cause who was free to do otherwise:

For it is certain that he is the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths. I do not conceive them as emanating from God like rays from the sun; but I know that God is the author of everything and that these truths are something and consequently that he is their author. I say that I know this, not that I conceive or grasp it; because it is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful although our soul, being finite, cannot grasp or conceive him. In the same way we can touch a mountain with our hands but we cannot put our arms around it as we could put them around a tree or something else not too large for them. To grasp something is to embrace it in one's thought; to know something, it is sufficient to touch it with one's thought.

You ask also what necessitates God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal – just as free

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<sup>17</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 110.

as he was not to create the world. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things.<sup>18</sup>

This letter alone cements Descartes' view that God is the author of everything and, since the eternal truths are something, He is their author as well. To question this, one might argue that Descartes changed his mind later in life, but I will maintain that his views remain unchanged and whole throughout his writings.<sup>19</sup> Ten years later in the 8<sup>th</sup> article of the 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies* Descartes maintains that there is nothing that does not depend on God: all order, every law and every reason for anything's being true or good depends on God, the supreme legislator who has ordained them from eternity. Finally, in a 1644 letter to Mesland, Descartes maintains that not only do the eternal truths depend on God for their existence, but that God could not have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together and could have done the opposite.<sup>20</sup> Since God can make any proposition true, including a proposition such as "radii of a circle are all equal and radii of a circle are all unequal," it seems as though no truth is necessary. As Harry Frankfurt, who is the most commonly referenced proponent of Universal Possibilism, characterizes it, "In short, the eternal truths are inherently as contingent as any other propositions."<sup>21</sup> Other proponents of Universal Possibilism cite a few other passages, but the intent of all these passages is the same: for any proposition, God can make that proposition true.

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<sup>18</sup> 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne; CSMK 25.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Alexandre Koyré, *Essai sur l'idée de dieu et les preuves de son existence chez Descartes* (Paris: Leroux, 1922), 19-21; cited in Frankfurt, "Creation," 37.

<sup>20</sup> 2 May 1644, Letter to Mesland; CSMK 235.

<sup>21</sup> Frankfurt, "Creation," 42.

### *Development of Universal Possibilism*

Frankfurt maintains that Descartes' doctrine concerning the creation of the eternal truths admits no limitation or qualification of God's power whatsoever.<sup>22</sup> Descartes' doctrine is universal in its scope, and he commits to the view that God's power is unintelligible to us due to our inability to conceive of an abridgement of the principle of non-contradiction. Frankfurt claims that Descartes regards as impossible the abridgement of the principle of non-contradiction as a function of the limitations of our human reasoning.<sup>23</sup> In other words, contradictory things are not impossible; they are guides to the boundaries of thought, not indications of God's might. Furthermore, Frankfurt holds that Descartes cannot intelligibly give an account of God's power:

Descartes regards the impossibility of self-contradictory propositions only as a function of the particular character human reason happens to have, rather than providing us in any way with a measure of God's power. [...] Descartes has already made it clear that, since God is infinite, we can give no intelligible account of His power. Given that God's power is not constrained by considerations of rationality, it is not reasonable to think that God actually is as our need for intelligibility and coherence requires us to conceive Him.<sup>24</sup>

To Frankfurt, the problem is whether there is a constraint on what God can do, not whether he exists and is omnipotent. Furthermore, Descartes' views on God's power may be unintelligible. If our rationality is no guide, we cannot know what He can or cannot do; in fact, we may not be able to know anything about actual reality. Frankfurt has gone so far as to say that there need not be necessary truths and that we are not able to access absolute reality by way of reason. Accordingly, the purpose of the *Meditations* is to explore the limits of reason and what is irrational for us to doubt; not what is true in

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>23</sup> The principle of non-contradiction states that it is impossible for the same thing to be and not be at the same time. For example, it cannot be the case that I concurrently exist and fail to exist.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

the eyes of God or of the angels. The limits of reason are not guides to the actual limits of what is possible or necessary:

The propositions we find to be necessary – like the Pythagorean theorem – need not be truths at all. The inconceivability of their falsity, which we demonstrate by the use of innate principles of reason, is not inherent in them. It is properly to be understood only relative to the character of our minds.<sup>25</sup>

Whether or not we find something inconceivable is not a guide to actual reality, it is only the nature of our minds. Furthermore, Frankfurt contends that there is a possible discrepancy between rationally grounded belief and absolute truth: were we to discover an absolute truth that conflicts with reason based belief, it would be unintelligible to us and we could make no use of it anyway. Frankfurt holds Descartes' God as being completely limitless; hence, reality itself may be without limit. We can only know what is irrational for us to doubt, not what is ultimately true.

Plantinga as well holds that Descartes would support the Universal Possibilism theory. He contends that while the textual evidence is not squarely behind Universal Possibilism, the fundamental thrust of Descartes' writings favors it. In Plantinga's view, Descartes maintains that God is sovereign and absolutely everything depends on Him and is within His control. In this way, for Plantinga's Descartes there is a deep connection between control and dependence:

And here, I think, Descartes clearly sees [...] the intimate connection between dependence and *power* or *control*. Descartes does not shrink from the indicated inference: if the eternal truths are genuinely dependent upon God, then they must be within his control. Each eternal truth must then be such that it was (and is) within God's power to make it false. Accordingly, God was 'free to make it untrue that all the lines drawn from the center of a circle to its circumference are equal'; his power is not limited even by the eternal truths of logic and mathematics. [...] What he really meant to say, I think, is not just that God could have made (30)  $[2 \times 4 = 8]$  *possibly* false; he could have made it *false*, and, indeed,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 45.

*necessarily* false. And here Descartes is not speaking just of mathematical truths; he means to say, I think, that *all* truths are within the control of God.<sup>26</sup>

Plantinga agrees with Frankfurt and James Van Cleve that Descartes held that God has control over all propositions and that all truths about abstract objects are within God's control.<sup>27</sup> As evidence, he considers passages from the 8<sup>th</sup> article of the 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies* and two letters (27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne and 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland). He concludes from these three passages that there are no necessary truths at all; every truth is contingent.

Where Frankfurt thinks Descartes' view is unintelligible or, at best, incoherent, Plantinga holds that Descartes' view is strongly counterintuitive. To show that Descartes' view is not unintelligible, Plantinga maintains that what someone says may be unintelligible in two ways: first, someone may utter something that we are unable to construe as words of any language we know. His example is a line from the poem *Jabberwocky*, by Lewis Carroll: "'Twas brillig; and the slithy toves did gyre and gymbble in the wabe." Carroll uses unintelligible words and we are unable to construe their meaning. Descartes' passages are not unintelligible in this way, for we have a good grasp of what he means when he contends that God has infinite power and there are no necessary truths. The second way is when words are used to form a proposition that we cannot understand due to our inability to grasp the concepts involved. For instance, were Plantinga to hold forth on a very nuanced and difficult concept in philosophy with an eight year old child, chances are quite good that that child would not have the necessary background to understand Plantinga and, thus, his words would be unintelligible to that child. But Descartes' claims are not like this either. It is not, as Frankfurt maintains, that

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<sup>26</sup> Plantinga, *Nature*, 113 – 115.

<sup>27</sup> James Van Cleve, "Descartes and the Destruction of the Eternal Truths," *Ratio* 7 (1994): 61.

we cannot grasp the concept of “infinite power.” Instead, according to Plantinga, all this means is that “if and only if for every proposition  $p$  there is an action  $A$  he can perform, such that if he did perform  $A$ , then  $p$  would be true.”<sup>28</sup> None of these concepts are beyond our grasp: we can understand what is being said, we just cannot understand how it could be true. Even if this view seems obviously false, if not impossible, that does not mean that it is unintelligible (although it may be incoherent).

Where Frankfurt solves the problem by maintaining that Descartes meant his writings to be an epistemic guide and no more, Plantinga argues that Descartes need not be committed to the necessity of his argument, only its truth. He contends that were Descartes committed to the necessity of his arguments, it would indeed be incoherent: that is, by accepting one of the premises, one is committed to denying the conclusion. Plantinga demonstrates that Descartes’ position would be incoherent if he held the following argument:

- 1) God has infinite power
- 2) Necessarily, if God is infinitely powerful then there are no necessary truths,
- 3) Therefore there are no necessary truths.<sup>29</sup>

This would be an incoherent position because the acceptance of one of the premises, namely that it is necessary that if God is infinitely powerful then there are no necessary truths, commits Descartes to the denial of the conclusion. In other words, Descartes may be arguing that his conception of God as infinitely powerful *must* entail that there are no necessary truths, not merely that it is so. Plantinga urges us to be as charitable as possible

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<sup>28</sup> Plantinga, *Nature*, 118.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

and see Descartes as arguing for the *truth* of the premise in question rather than its necessity. Instead, Descartes could hold that:

- 1) God has infinite power
- 2) If God has infinite power, there are no necessary truths
- 3) Therefore, there are no necessary truths.

In this way, Descartes can hold that all eternal truths are within God's control and only be committed to principles of logic that depend on God no less than anything else. He is not committed to the necessity of any of these premises, nor is he committed to the necessity of the form of his argument, only its truth. Descartes can prove that a modus ponens argument is true in the same way any modern logician would prove its validity, or by intuition.<sup>30</sup> He would say he clearly and distinctly perceives that it cannot be false. We may see that the form of modus ponens cannot be false; we may say it is necessarily true. Descartes maintains that what we see is not its necessity but its truth, and he sees that as clearly as we do.<sup>31</sup>

The conclusion Plantinga reaches is that Descartes holds any number of outrageous suggestions to be possibly true, suggestions such as that God is omnipotent and at the same time powerless. His characterization of Descartes' theory is that Descartes prefers one set of intuitions, while Plantinga himself prefers another. Where Descartes prefers the intuition that everything depends on God and all truth is within his control, Plantinga holds that the denial of a contradiction is "as stable and clear and compelling as any intuition we have."<sup>32</sup> Plantinga demonstrates these different intuitions

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<sup>30</sup> A modus ponens argument is any argument of the following form: (1) if p, then q; (2) p; (3) therefore, q. Descartes' argument discussed here is a substitution instance of this form of argument.

<sup>31</sup> Plantinga, *Nature*, 124.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

by considering whether the proposition that “God knows that he does not exist” is possible, according to his interpretation of Descartes’ argument:

- 1) God is sovereign.
- 2) If God is sovereign, then everything must depend on Him.
- 3) If everything is dependent on Him, then every truth is within his control.
- 4) If every truth is within his control, then the proposition that “God knows that he does not exist” could be true and is possible.

Therefore,

- 5) “God knows that he does not exist” is possible.<sup>33</sup>

Premise 1 is not negotiable for most theists, and premise 4 is merely a formalization of the intuition that anything within God’s control is possible. Premises 2 and 3 have some intuitive support, but so does the denial of the conclusion (premise 5). Under Plantinga’s interpretation of Descartes’ theories, we should embrace the intuitions that underlie premises 2 and 3 and accept the conclusion. For Plantinga, though, the intuition to deny the conclusion and, hence, either premise 2 or 3 is more compelling. In the end, the conflict is between two intuitions: the intuition that God is genuinely sovereign and thus anything is possible, and the intuition that some things are genuinely impossible.

Plantinga maintains that the conflict between these intuitions is not really an issue; in fact, it is obvious that not everything is possible. He asserts that it is more obvious, far more obvious than either of the premises in question, that it is impossible that God be omniscient and at the same time not know anything at all.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 134.



While Plantinga interprets Descartes to hold to a counterintuitive basic intuition, Van Cleve argues that Descartes' attempt to ground necessary truths in something contingent, namely God's free will, does away with necessity altogether. He argues that if it is conceivable to make the necessity of some truth dependent on an issue, it is also conceivable to make that truth itself dependent on that issue.<sup>34</sup> Van Cleve relies on two passages from Descartes' letters to Mersenne to argue for the contingency of propositions generally, and from there to the conclusion that nothing is necessary and everything is possible.<sup>35</sup> Van Cleve's eventual conclusion is twofold: first, any sort of possibilism or creation doctrine leads to Universal Possibilism and, second, that Descartes' overall view is inconsistent. While he holds some facts about God to be necessary, Van Cleve interprets Descartes' arguments to maintain that *nothing* is necessary.<sup>36</sup>

Van Cleve's argument proceeds as follows. He first constructs a premise that expresses the contingency of volition: if an agent wills that *p*, it is possible that he not so will. To this he adds a premise which he believes is implied by the passage cited from the 6 May 1630 letter to Mersenne: if something is necessary and true, it follows that God wills that thing. He first finds that if there is something that is necessary and true, it is possible that God had refrained from willing that thing, which is simply an instance of his first premise. Furthermore, if it is possible that God had refrained from willing that thing, the negation of that thing itself is also possible. So, according to Van Cleve, if something is both necessary and true, it turns out that the negation of that same thing is also

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<sup>34</sup> Van Cleve, "Destruction," 63.

<sup>35</sup> The two passages Van Cleve considers are from Descartes' 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne: "The mathematical truths, which you call eternal, have been established by God and depend on him entirely, just as all other creatures do. . . . He has established these laws in nature as a king establishes laws in his kingdom" (CSMK 22; cited in "Destruction," 58); and Descartes' 6 May 1630 letter to Mersenne: "As for the eternal truths, I say once more that they are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible. . . . In God willing and knowing are a single thing" (CSMK 24; cited in "Destruction," 60).

<sup>36</sup> Van Cleve, "Destruction," 61.

possible. One important equality that Van Cleve points out is that saying that something is *possibly not* is equivalent to saying that something is *not necessary*. So, for any given thing, including so called necessary things, that thing is not necessary, according to Van Cleve's interpretation, because God could have willed its negation. Hence his conclusion that Descartes is committed to Universal Possibilism; nothing is necessary and everything is possible.<sup>37</sup>

### *Advantages of Universal Possibilism*

One of the most satisfying results of Universal Possibilism is that the argument stays very close to Descartes' sense of theism and is consistent with all of the passages that attribute powers to God. Universal Possibilism keeps God as he should be: the creator of all things and the being upon whom all things depend. A recurring theme in Descartes' writings is the immense power of God; indeed, He is the most powerful being one could imagine. Any theory that lessens or abridges God's infinite power has failed to appreciate this theme in Descartes' writings. Universal Possibilism maintains this aspect of Descartes' doctrine.

Both Frankfurt and Plantinga interpret Descartes in a charitable way that remains true to his writings and maintains the consistency of his theories regarding the eternal truths. On the one hand, Frankfurt's interpretation of the creation doctrine as an epistemic guide rather than an indication of what is or is not truly possible permits us to interpret Descartes' theory as allowing us to know things that God can do, but not what He cannot do. In this view, we must not speculate on the limitations of God, for as Descartes himself often claims, we can never say that God could not do a certain thing. On the other

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<sup>37</sup> For a formal account of his argument, see Van Cleve, "Destruction," 61.

hand, Plantinga's interpretation provides a justification for what is, to some, nothing less than a glaring error in Descartes' reasoning.<sup>38</sup> But for others, Plantinga has explained Descartes, making his theories intelligible, coherent and based on intuitions. He has construed Descartes' writings in such a way that it is a friendly disagreement over which basic propositions one wants to accept or which foundational belief is more intuitive.

### *Objections to Universal Possibilism*

Unfortunately, Universal Possibilism has some drawbacks. I will consider two interrelated classes of problems within this theory. First, the result of this doctrine goes directly against much of what Descartes wrote. Descartes clearly held some things to be truly necessary, for instance that God exists or that He is omnipotent, while Universal Possibilism would hold no truth is necessary. Second, if all things are possible in this fairly radical sense, then there is an asymmetry between what is conceivable and what is possible. But, Descartes also held that clear and distinct perception is a reliable guide to not only the truth of a proposition but also its modal status. It seems Universal Possibilism might undermine Descartes' doctrine of clear and distinct perception. These two problems relate to a more general problem, namely that if Universal Possibilism is a reliable interpretation of Descartes' creation doctrine, some of his most foundational arguments are in jeopardy. If any proposition is possible and there are no necessary truths, both his ontological argument for the existence of God and his *cogito* argument confirming knowledge of his own existence fail. His ontological argument fails because it is immediately apparent that there is no longer such a thing as a necessarily existing

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, Jonathan Bennett says that Cartesian scholars have felt forced to shield Descartes "from his own splatter." See Bennett, "Descartes's Theory of Modality," *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994), 639.

being, only beings contingent on God's will; and this includes God himself. Also, Universal Possibilism allows for possible truths such as "I think, nevertheless I am not."

However, Frankfurt's suggestion that eternal truths should be a guide to the limits of reason and *not* a guide to reality as seen by God or the angels seems to conflict with other comments by Descartes.<sup>39</sup> Frankfurt contends, for instance, that the impossibility of self-contradictory positions is nothing more than a feature of contingent human thought instead of an actual condition of reality. But Descartes clearly maintains that what God created is what is ultimately real or true. In a number of passages Descartes says quite plainly that God created the eternal truths from all eternity, and created them with the properties they have:

It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be *in fact possible*, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible.<sup>40</sup>

In this passage, as in others, Descartes draws a link between what God could have done and what he actually did.<sup>41</sup> He gives no indication that the mind is only discovering what God wished us to *think* was possible; he explicitly contends that we conceive as possible those things God actually made possible. If it is possible, we should attempt to interpret Descartes in a way that is consistent with all of his writings.

Furthermore, the Universal Possibilist argument that all propositions are possible seems to be at odds with Descartes' views on the existence of God. In the 5<sup>th</sup> *Meditation*, for example, Descartes considers the idea he has of God. He first deems that the existence

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Richard LaCroix, "Descartes on God's Ability to Do the Logically Impossible," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14 (1984), 465, 470.

<sup>40</sup> 2 May 1644, Letter to Mesland; CSMK 235, italics mine.

<sup>41</sup> For similar passages, see 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies*, CSM 2:293, 5<sup>th</sup> *Replies*, CSM 2:261, and the 15 April 1630 Letter to Mesland, CSMK 22.

of God has at least as much certainty as the mathematical truths.<sup>42</sup> Soon after, he finds that existence belongs to the essence or nature of God, and God alone, and thus God necessarily exists. That is, there is only one God and God necessarily exists from and will abide for eternity:

First of all, there is the fact that, apart from God, there is nothing else of which I am capable of thinking such that existence belongs to its essence. Second, I cannot understand how there could be two or more Gods of this kind; and after supposing that one God exists, I plainly see that it is necessary that he has existed from eternity and will abide for eternity. And finally, I perceive many other attributes of God, none of which I can remove or alter.<sup>43</sup>

Descartes clearly holds that at least something is not possible, namely that God does not exist, or that he has not existed from and will abide for eternity. Nowhere in Descartes' writings does he entertain the notion that the propositions that God exists and is powerful are possibly false, except to show that such a proposition is not possible; therefore, the notion of a necessarily existing and omnipotent God is certainly true.

Finally, although Descartes holds some truths to be eternal, Universal Possibilism allows for their truth value to change at any time. That is, if nothing is necessary and every proposition is possible, it follows that the truth value of any proposition can change at any time.<sup>44</sup> For instance, the proposition "2+2 = 4 will be false tomorrow" is possible. The theory fails to take into account that Descartes holds that, although God *can* change the eternal truths, he never will because his will is eternal and immutable:

It will be said that if God had established these truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. 'But I understand them to be eternal and unchangeable.' – I make the same judgement [sic] about God. 'But his will is free.' – Yes, but his power is beyond

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<sup>42</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> *Meditation*, CSM 2:45.

<sup>43</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> *Meditation*, CSM 2:47.

<sup>44</sup> Van Den Brink, "Descartes, Modalities, and God," 6-7.

our grasp. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power.<sup>45</sup>

The eternal truths are eternal in the sense that God's will will never change. The Universal Possibilist contention that the eternal truths can change because anything is possible does not match up with Descartes' conception of the immutability of God's will. In Descartes' view, the eternal truths are created from eternity by God; there is no time in which these laws do not obtain.

Another problem with Universal Possibilism is that it seems to undermine Descartes' doctrine of clear and distinct perception. In order to understand how it is undermined, we must first inquire into the doctrine of clear and distinct perception itself. In the *Principles of Philosophy* and the *Meditations* Descartes plainly develops the notion that we will never make a mistake about what we judge as long as we only assent to what we clearly and distinctly perceive.<sup>46</sup> He bases this on his previously developed idea of God which includes not only his existence but also the necessary perfection of not being a deceiver:

It is certain, however, that we will never mistake the false for the true provided we give our assent only to what we clearly and distinctly perceive. I say that this is certain because God is not a deceiver, and so the faculty of perception which he has given us cannot incline to falsehood; and the same goes for the faculty of assent, provided its scope is limited to what is clearly perceived.<sup>47</sup>

When we clearly and distinctly perceive something, if we give our assent to that thing, we can be certain of its truth because God would not deceive us. We perceive something clearly when it is present and accessible to the mind. Descartes helps clarify his view by

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<sup>45</sup> 15 April 1630, Letter to Mersenne; CSMK 22.

<sup>46</sup> See the *Meditations*, especially *Meditation 3*, CSM 2:24, and the *Principles of Philosophy* I. 43 – 46, CSM 1:207 – 208.

<sup>47</sup> *Principles of Philosophy* I. 43, CSM 1:207.

saying that something is clear to the mind just as we say “we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility.”<sup>48</sup> By “distinct” Descartes means that a given perception is “so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.”<sup>49</sup> Descartes thinks these perceptions apply to eternal, or necessary, truths as well.<sup>50</sup> In *Principles of Philosophy*, articles 48 through 50, Descartes explains the sorts of things that are the objects of our perception. These include things (substances, both extended and non-extended), affections of things (modes, qualities or attributes), and eternal truths. Descartes defines eternal truths not as things or modes of things but as common notions or axioms that we recognize when we come upon them; they reside in our mind and we cannot fail to know them when we come upon them.<sup>51</sup> In the 50<sup>th</sup> Article, Descartes allows that these truths are capable of being clearly and distinctly perceived by anyone: hence the moniker “common notion.” For Descartes, clear and distinct perception is not only a guide to the truth of a given proposition but also an indication of whether that thing is possible (such as one’s putting on a coat) or necessary (such as God’s existing).

Frankfurt’s interpretation makes it clear that there may be a lacuna between what our limits of reason tell us is possible and what is *actually* possible. He holds Descartes’ doctrine of clear and distinct perception in regards to modal notions as a doctrine of experienced necessity: we experience, and thus assent to, necessity under some conditions rather than others. If this is the case, God might well have arbitrarily made us

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<sup>48</sup> CSM 1:207, *Principles of Philosophy* I. 45.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Though this list is by no means exhaustive, in addition to the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes mentions clear and distinct perception in regards to modal concepts in the following letters to Mersenne: 28 October 1640, CSMK 155; 31 December 1640, CSMK 166; March 1642, CSMK 211.

<sup>51</sup> The examples he lists in Article 49, CSM 1:209 are as follows: *It is impossible for the same thing to be and not be at the same time; What is done cannot be undone; He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks.*

different. That we cannot assent to the possibility that contradictory propositions can be mutually true is merely a contingent feature of our minds and does not lead us to knowledge of actual possibility:

The theoretical limits of human reason must be recognized as *limitations* by which we are bound, rather than as guides to the actual limits of possibility. They are imposed upon us arbitrarily by God's free creation. So we cannot presume that what we determine to be logically necessary coincides with the ultimate conditions of reality or truth.<sup>52</sup>

For all we can tell, the ultimate conditions of reality or truth do not coincide with our most clear and distinct notions of what is possible or necessary. This asymmetry between what is conceivable and what is possible presents a problem for Descartes' doctrine of the truth of clear and distinct ideas. Under Frankfurt's interpretation, God could have made true what we cannot conceive as possible. But as I have shown, Descartes holds that we can know both the truth of a proposition and whether it is possible. These certainly contradict Descartes' idea that God is not a deceiver, for God could have made something true which we cannot conceive as true or even possible. In such a case, we would have clearly and distinctly perceived something and yet mistaken the false for the true. That is, we would clearly and distinctly conceive of some proposition as true ("this thing is impossible") which God has made false ("this thing is both possible and true").

Universal Possibilism thus causes even more trouble for Descartes because *any notion* he has of the eternal truths may be wrong. According to Universal Possibilism it is not impossible for the same thing to be and not be at the same time: indeed, its possibility is guaranteed by God's unlimited power. But if the Universal Possibilism interpretation holds, his doctrine of clear and distinct perception is undermined because every step in Descartes' deductive method from the *cogito* to his science of physics can be questioned.

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<sup>52</sup> Frankfurt, "Creation," 45.



Regarding any necessary or natural law Descartes claims to know, one could ask whether it could be the case that the opposite of that law is also at the same time true; and Descartes must answer affirmatively. This jeopardizes the metaphysical foundation that he says in the *Principles of Philosophy* is crucial for his physics. So Universal Possibilism would require a different, better, foundation on which to rest Descartes' physical theories, a foundation that takes into account that any proposition is possible. It is therefore clear that an interpretation of the relation between God and the eternal truths that maintains the coherence of Descartes' doctrine of clear and distinct perception is preferable to Universal Possibilism.

In short, the major problem with Universal Possibilism seems to be that it allows too much to be possible. This interpretation allows the possibility of too many things that destroy Descartes' most foundational and precious arguments. But at the same time, proponents of the theory are sensitive to Descartes' desire to keep God as sovereign and as powerful as possible while trying to interpret two theses that Descartes holds together: one relates the eternal truths to God and the other relates them to us.<sup>53</sup> The proponent of Universal Possibilism wants to maintain that, in regard to the first thesis, God could absolutely and undeniably do something like create a mountain without a valley. Unfortunately, this would also maintain that we (wrongly) think there could not be a mountain without a valley because we cannot conceive of it. If we hold to the universal possibilist's account of the relation between these two theses, it turns the creation doctrine into "a rogue elephant crashing destructively through the rest of Descartes'

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<sup>53</sup> Bennett, "Theory of Modality," 645.

work.”<sup>54</sup> To show how that can be avoided is the aim of Limited Possibilism, the view to which I now turn.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER IV

### LIMITED POSSIBILISM

Limited Possibilism, another interpretation of Descartes' creation doctrine, recognizes that Descartes held some truths to be necessary even though they were freely created by God. This theory, suggested first by Peter Geach and more formally developed by Edwin Curley, contends that for any proposition  $p$ , it is possible that  $p$  is possible.<sup>55</sup> In other words, God controls the modal status of any given proposition: the eternal truths are necessary, but they are only contingently necessary because it is not necessary that God will them.<sup>56</sup>

Limited Possibilism is principally motivated by the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland in which Descartes states that "even if God has willed that some truths be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily." By focusing on this and similar passages, proponents of Limited Possibilism maintain the cogency of Descartes' overall arguments, especially his clear and distinct criterion for truth, and provide a way to hold both that the eternal truths are necessary and freely created by God. Despite these strengths, however, Limited Possibilism has inherent weaknesses. If this theory holds God as the arbiter of only modal propositions, then there are some things outside of His control, namely the truth of the propositions themselves. This, as Plantinga argues, "is at most a trifling and churlish concession to Descartes' deep conviction that all things are dependent upon God and hence within his control."<sup>57</sup> However, if Limited Possibilism allows that God has

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<sup>55</sup> See Peter Geach, "Omnipotence," *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 7-20; and E. M. Curley, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," *Philosophical Review* 93 (1984): 569-97. Cf. Lilli Alanen, "Descartes, Duns Scotus and Ockham on Omnipotence and Possibility," *Franciscan Studies* 45 (1984): 157-88.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Dan Kaufman, "Descartes's Creation Doctrine and Modality," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 80 (2002): 31.

<sup>57</sup> Plantinga, *Nature*, 113.

control of the truth of the propositions, then it turns out to be logically equivalent to Universal Possibilism. If God controls the propositions as well as their modal status, Limited Possibilism is plagued by the same problems that give us pause when we consider the unlimited scope of Universal Possibilism.

### *Textual Grounding for Limited Possibilism*

Proponents of Limited Possibilism use primarily two types of passages as the basis for their interpretation: passages wherein Descartes holds God to have made necessary truths actually necessary, though He was not necessitated to do so, and passages that show Descartes to believe that we perceive some truths as necessary. Curley argues that in addition to this, Descartes' commitment to necessary truths in his ontological argument, his acknowledgment that we clearly and distinctly perceive some truths to be necessary, and his use of an *a priori* method of physics firmly establishes the Limited Possibilism interpretation.<sup>58</sup> So before he can build his entire epistemic edifice, Descartes must first show how the necessity of God's existence is implicit in our idea of a supremely perfect being. To do that, he has to assume that at least one truth is necessary, namely, that God necessarily exists. This insight helps motivate an interpretation of his writing that allows for there to be actually necessary truths as opposed to merely epistemically necessary truths. Since Descartes' criterion for truth is the combination of clear and distinct perception and the fact that God is not a deceiver, certain propositions must be necessary because they ground Descartes' criterion for truth itself and, thereby,

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<sup>58</sup> Curley, "Eternal Truths," 574.

his physics as well.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Curley notes that “the recognition of necessary truths seems to be central to his philosophy of science.”<sup>60</sup>

Two texts in particular illustrate the justification for Limited Possibilism: the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland and the 6<sup>th</sup> Article in the 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies*. In the letter, Descartes answers concerns and questions expressed by a friend and admired priest. The letter addresses the question as to how God could be acting freely if he had made an eternal truth false. Descartes’ answer is twofold: the power of God can have no limits and our mind is made to conceive as possible those things which God wished to be possible, but not the opposite. Even though God willed certain things to be necessary, he did not will them necessarily:

I turn now to the difficulty of conceiving how God would have been acting freely and indifferently if he had made it false that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories could not be true together. It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible. The first consideration shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite. The second consideration assures us that even if this be true, we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so. And even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it. I agree that there are contradictions which are so evident that we cannot put them before our minds without judging them entirely impossible, like the one which you suggest: ‘that God might have brought it about that his creatures were independent of him’. But if we would know the immensity of his power we should not put these thoughts before our minds, nor should we conceive any precedence or priority between his intellect and his will; for the idea which we have of God teaches us that there is in him only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> As discussed earlier, pages 24-25.

<sup>60</sup> Curley, “Eternal Truths,” 573.

<sup>61</sup> 2 May 1644, Letter to Mesland; CSMK 235.

Descartes held three important things to be true: God's power is without limits (even logical limits); God freely willed that some truths be necessary; and God is a single, pure activity. The proponent of Limited Possibilism interprets this as meaning that God has the power to will the necessity of anything, that God willed some things to be necessary and he did so freely. Contrast this with the view of Frankfurt, who interprets this as meaning that God has the power to will absolutely anything, God willed some things to be necessary (as far as we know, because the necessity is merely an epistemic limit), and he did so freely.

Descartes' reply to the 6<sup>th</sup> set of objections gives us another example of the necessity of some truth depending on God.<sup>62</sup> Here, Descartes again responds to concerns that God's freedom has been abridged. Descartes contends that nothing in the divine intellect was good or true before the divine will made it so. With this in mind, he contends that there is no priority of order or reason that determined God to make one thing true rather than another. It is because God wills it that things are necessary or good; in fact He could have made it not necessary that the three angles of a triangle equal two right angles:

For example, God did not will the creation of the world in time because he saw that it would be better this way than if he had created it from eternity; nor did he will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise, and so on. On the contrary, it is because he willed to create the world in time that it is better this way than if he had created it from eternity; and it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise; and so on in other cases.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> objections were written by various anonymous theologians and philosophers and compiled by Mersenne.

<sup>63</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies*, art. 6; CSM 2:291.

To Descartes, some things are necessary and some impossible, furthermore, it is up to God which things have what modal properties. Nothing impels God one way or the other. He has the liberty to make anything true, and for the Limited Possibilist, this includes modal properties. The theory holds that if God wills that something is necessary, then it is truly necessary. So, God wills the modal properties of propositions: He wills the possibility of possibilities.

Descartes also holds that we understand the necessity of some truths as well as the truths themselves. Geach and Curley view this as further justification for the Limited Possibilism view. We comprehend the necessity of some truths, but at the same time, we understand that they are not necessarily necessary. As Geach puts it:

Descartes held that the truths of logic and arithmetic are freely made to be true by God's will. To be sure, we clearly and distinctly see that these truths are necessary; they are necessary in our world, and in giving us our mental endowments God gave us the right sort of clear and distinct ideas to see the necessity. But though they are necessary, they are not necessarily necessary; God could have freely chosen to make a different sort of world, in which other things would have been necessary truths.<sup>64</sup>

God's free will makes necessary truths absolutely necessary. Herein lies the difference between Limited and Universal Possibilism. In the former, not every proposition is possible, some are impossible or necessary. That is, in Limited Possibilism, the eternal truths are not necessarily necessary: God could have done other than he did. Even so, God did make necessary things actually necessary. Furthermore, we can clearly and distinctly perceive the necessity of some truths. As I noted earlier, at least one such truth is the necessary existence of God.<sup>65</sup> In addition Descartes notes that we cannot fail to know the eternal truths when they are presented before our minds:

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<sup>64</sup> Geach, "Omnipotence," 10.

<sup>65</sup> As discussed earlier, page 20-21.

But when we recognize that it is impossible for anything to come from nothing, the proposition *Nothing comes from nothing* is regarded not as a really existing thing, or even as a mode of a thing, but as an eternal truth which resides within our mind. Such truths are termed common notions or axioms. The following are examples of this class: *It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time*; *What is done cannot be undone*; *He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks*; and countless others. It would not be easy to draw up a list of all of them; but nonetheless we cannot fail to know them when the occasion for thinking about them arises, provided that we are not blinded by preconceived notions.<sup>66</sup>

We cannot fail to recognize the impossibility of some things, and the certain truth of others. We call these the eternal truths, common notions or axioms. Descartes holds that we clearly and distinctly perceive the modal properties as well as the truth of such propositions. Furthermore, there are more modal properties than mere possibility. If we believe the Universal Possibilist, possibility is the only modal property contained in any proposition. Since Descartes holds that some propositions are impossible and others are necessary, his interpreters must understand him as regarding the relationship between God and the eternal truths as consistent with Descartes' views that some truths are necessary or impossible and that perfection is essential to God's nature.

### *Development of Limited Possibilism*

Not long after Geach first suggested his interpretation of Descartes' theory, Plantinga christened it "Limited Possibilism"; but it was Curley who most fully and faithfully developed the idea. Curley calls Universal Possibilism the standard interpretation, but he rejects it due to its systematic difficulties.<sup>67</sup> Instead, he pursues the alternative that there are, in fact, necessary truths, even if some or all of them are created

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<sup>66</sup> *Principles of Philosophy* I. 49; CSM 1:209.

<sup>67</sup> Curley identifies three systematic difficulties: (1) Descartes' commitment to true and immutable natures in the ontological argument, (2) his acknowledgment that we clearly and distinctly perceive some truths as necessary and (3) his use of an *a priori* method in physics. See Curley, "Eternal Truths," 574-75.



by God.<sup>68</sup> Geach's primary concern is with determining how the interpretation of divine omnipotence can be philosophically justified or at least made consistent with Christian doctrines, not with finding a consistent way to link the free creation of eternal truths to God in Descartes' writings. Nevertheless, along the way he plants a seed that becomes Limited Possibilism. In his article, "Omnipotence," he considers four theories of omnipotence: God can do everything absolutely; God can do  $x$  only when it is logically consistent; God can do  $x$  only if "God does  $x$ " is logically consistent; and if "God will bring about  $x$ " is logically possible, then God can bring about  $x$ .<sup>69</sup> Geach proposes that Descartes holds the first sense of omnipotence, which Geach describes as incoherent.<sup>70</sup> That God can do absolutely anything may easily be interpreted as meaning that for any proposition, that proposition is possible. Interestingly, Geach goes on to say that we clearly and distinctly see the necessity of the eternal truths:

Descartes held that the truths of logic and arithmetic are freely made to be true by God's will. To be sure we clearly and distinctly see that these truths are necessary; they are necessary in our world, and in giving us our mental endowments God gave us the right sort of clear and distinct ideas to see the necessity. But though they are necessary, they are not necessarily necessary; God could have freely chosen to make a different sort of world, in which other things would have been necessary truths.<sup>71</sup>

God freely created the eternal truths, we clearly and distinctly know these truths as necessary, and their necessity itself depends on God's will. For Geach this means that Descartes holds that we cannot comprehend other possibilities but only dimly apprehend them. Descartes compares this distinction to the difference between a tree trunk and a mountain, we can wrap our arms around a tree trunk but can only place our hands upon a

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 577.

<sup>69</sup> Geach, "Omnipotence," 9.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 10.

mountain. Geach contends that God would possess knowledge of alternate possibilities as would creatures in an alternate world whom God would endow with clear and distinct ideas of their necessary truths.

For Geach, however, Descartes' position is not completely lost, for masters of modal logic might possibly provide some sort of grounding or structure for it. In fact, Geach predicts Curley's modal argument in a vague and somewhat demeaning way:

In recent years, unsound philosophies have been defended by what I may call shyster logicians: some of the more dubious recent developments of modal logic could certainly be used to defend Descartes. A system in which 'possibly p' were a theorem – in which everything is possible – has indeed never been taken seriously; but modal logicians have taken seriously systems in which 'possibly possibly p', or again 'it is not necessary that necessarily p', would be a theorem for arbitrary interpretation of 'p'. [sic]<sup>72</sup>

Though he does not put much stock into it, Geach recognizes that Descartes' position could be rendered consistent by an odd logical system. He contends that shyster logicians could “fadge up a case” for Descartes, which further convinces him of the disreputability of modal logic.<sup>73</sup> He considers this position untenable and concludes that a Christian need not and cannot believe in absolute omnipotence.

Plantinga baptized Geach's notion as Limited Possibilism in 1980.<sup>74</sup> Plantinga puts forward the uncontroversial suggestion that for Descartes, even though eternal truths are necessary, God made them so and could have made them contingent instead. Plantinga interprets Geach as holding that, at least with respect to mathematical and logical truths, Descartes teaches Limited Possibilism. Plantinga points to two passages in Descartes to support his contention: the by now familiar remark to Mesland that we are

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 11. “Current” for Geach is 1973, when this article was written. At the time, modal logic was not widely understood; it has since made great strides in scope and popularity.

<sup>74</sup> Plantinga, *Nature*, 103.

not “able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has in fact wished to make impossible;”<sup>75</sup> and his 6<sup>th</sup> *Reply* comment that “it is because God willed the three angles of a triangle to be necessarily equal to two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise.”<sup>76</sup> To Plantinga, these passages illustrate Descartes’ belief that it is up to God which truths are necessary. Accordingly, in Limited Possibilism it is false that “possibly  $p$ ” is true for every proposition  $p$ , but “possibly possibly  $p$ ” is true for every  $p$ . That is, God affirms “ $2 \times 4 = 8$ ” in every possible world, and in the actual world he affirms “necessarily,  $2 \times 4 = 8$ ”. However there are possible worlds in which He does not affirm this latter statement. If any of these had been actual worlds, there would have been other possible worlds in which “ $2 \times 4 = 8$ ” is false.<sup>77</sup>

For his part, Curley recognizes Descartes’ belief that the eternal truths are created with everything else, in God’s one simple act of creation. There is no time before which the eternal truths were not true, no time after which they will cease to be true. But, as with any act of free will, it is at least logically possible that the thing willed was not willed. So, too, with the eternal truths. From this, God’s omnipotence and the assumption that there are things that are necessary, Curley deduces that for any proposition, it is possible that that proposition is possible. Curley understands Descartes’ creation doctrine as a denial that those truths that are necessary are necessarily necessary.<sup>78</sup> The 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland wherein Descartes draws a distinction between the proposition “God wills that  $x$  be necessary” and “Necessarily, God wills  $x$ ” supports this intuition.

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<sup>75</sup> 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland; CSMK 235.

<sup>76</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> *Replies*, art. 6; CSM 2:291.

<sup>77</sup> Plantinga, *Nature*, 109.

<sup>78</sup> Curley, “Eternal Truths,” 581.

Curley begins his formal argument by drawing a connection between volition and contingency in order to reflect Descartes' contention that God's creative act is utterly free. He generalizes the rule to say that if any agent wills a proposition, then it is at least logically possible that that agent not will that proposition. He then introduces God's omnipotence by saying that a proposition is true if and only if God wills it to be true. After he formalizes acts of will and God's omnipotence, he assumes the existence of a necessary truth. Given his assumption that something is true if and only if God wills it to be true, it follows that if a necessary truth exists, then God willed it. In virtue of his first assumption about willing anything, if God willed a particular necessary truth, it could have been the case that He did not will it. So, at this point we have the possibility that God does not will the necessary truth under consideration to be necessary. But, since that truth is necessary if and *only if* God wills it to be necessary, then it is possible that the necessary truth is not necessary. Since this could be any necessary truth, our deduction thus far allows us to generalize our argument so far to say that for any necessary truth, it is possible that that necessary truth is not the case or, equivalently, that for any truth, the possibility of that truth is possible. Curley takes his argument to show that we should understand Descartes' creation doctrine as involving a denial that those which *are* necessary are necessarily necessary.<sup>79</sup>

### *Advantages of Limited Possibilism*

Curley supports his argument by considering two beneficial effects it has on Descartes' theories. Until this interpretation, the most common view attributed to

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<sup>79</sup> The argument is fully formalized in Curley, "Eternal Truth," 580-81. See Appendix A for a recreation of his argument.

Descartes—that for any proposition that proposition is possible—was considered somewhat incoherent, or at least perplexing. Curley notes that the logical system in his interpretation of Descartes’ creation doctrine is logically true and coherent; any claim that a given truth is possible is at least consistent.<sup>80</sup> Logical systems that support Curley’s interpretation of Descartes’ creation doctrine, called Lewis systems after C. I. Lewis, have semantic interpretations, decision procedures, and are consistent.<sup>81</sup> By interpreting Descartes’ theory in such a way, Limited Possibilism raises the theory regarding the eternal truths out of the mire of incomprehensibility.

A second reason to prefer Curley’s view to Universal Possibilism is that it maintains the principle of non-vacuous contrast.<sup>82</sup> According to this principle, if everything were possible, what meaning would terms like necessary or impossible have? There would be no point to characterizing anything as possible, for the very term would lose meaning, since the possible could no longer be opposed to the impossible. Limited Possibilism preserves the semantic content of Descartes’ utterances regarding the possibility or impossibility of certain substances or modes or eternal truths.

There are still other intuitive advantages to Curley’s interpretation. He reconciles his reading of Descartes with the systematic difficulties he found inherent in the Universal Possibilism analysis that there are no necessary truths. Curley’s Limited Possibilism maintains the necessity of certain truths that are required for many of Descartes’ arguments, giving it an advantage over Universal Possibilism. For example, the necessity of God’s existence, on which Descartes’ ontological argument depends, is

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<sup>80</sup> Curley, “Eternal Truths,” 589.

<sup>81</sup> Standard modal logic systems include T, S4 and S5. The Lewis systems are S6-S8.

<sup>82</sup> Curley, “Eternal Truths,” 593.

saved. So too is the foundation of his doctrine of clear and distinct perception and, hence, his metaphysics and physics.

Curley concludes that necessary truths are *actually necessary*; that is, they could not be other than they are in any world we can conceive of or that God could create. In any conception of the way the world could be, the eternal truths would be true. Of course, another way to refer to different conceptions of the way the world could be or other worlds God could have created would be to talk about possible worlds. Curley notes that, in this sense, Descartes anticipates an idea normally credited to Leibniz, that eternal truths are those which are true in all possible worlds.<sup>83</sup> As Descartes claims:

I shall be content with telling you that apart from the three laws I have expounded, I do not wish to suppose any others but those which follow inevitable from the eternal truths on which mathematicians have usually based their most certain and most evident demonstrations – the truths, I say, according to which God himself has taught us that he has arranged all things in number, weight and measure. The knowledge of these truths is so natural to our souls that we cannot but judge them infallible when we conceive them distinctly, nor doubt that if God had created many worlds, they would be as true in each of them as in this one.<sup>84</sup>

Curley takes Descartes to mean that the laws of nature are true in all possible worlds.

This being the case, not only does this passage support his reading of Descartes, but it is also consistent with our modern views of necessity. Informally, we generally view necessity in two ways: either a proposition is necessary if it cannot be false, or it is necessary if it is true in every way we think that the world could be. So not only does Curley's interpretation support and ground Descartes' foundations of his philosophy, but it also corresponds our modern intuitions of necessity.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 573.

<sup>84</sup> *The World*, ch. 7; CSM 1:97. For a similar passage, see *Discourse on the Method*, V; CSM 1:132.

### *Objections to Limited Possibilism*

Although this theory nicely grounds Descartes' philosophy, there are two significant problems that plague it. The first is that Limited Possibilism may give God control over only the modal status of a proposition, that is, whether a proposition is possible or not. If this is the case, God does not have control over the actual truth of a given proposition, this is strictly against Descartes' doctrines because it would seem to limit God's power. If, on the other hand, God *does* have control over the actual truth of a proposition in addition to its modal status, Limited Possibilism is reducible to Universal Possibilism. It would thus fail to solve the systematic problems that it was supposed to in the first place. These problems each lead to an unsatisfactory conclusion. The first is that if God has control over only the modal status of a proposition, his control is too limited. The second is that if God has control over the truth of a given proposition as well as its modal status, everything is possible and there are no necessary truths.

If Limited Possibilism holds, God's power is restricted. For any eternal truth, according to this theory, it is not possible that that eternal truth actually be false because God has decreed its necessity. But, it *is* possible that the negation of that eternal truth is possible.<sup>85</sup> This is because Limited Possibilism holds that for any proposition, it is possible that that proposition is possible, so for the proposition that is the negation of an eternal truth, that negation is possibly possible. It is clear that Descartes held, at least, the relatively weak requirement for omnipotence that God can bring about any possible or conceivable state of affairs: anything I can conceive, God can bring about. This seems like an eminently reasonable requirement for omnipotence. If all I lack is the power to accomplish some task—that is, I can clearly conceive how the task could be done—God

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<sup>85</sup> In other words, for any eternal truth *p*, it is not possible that *not p*. But, it is possible that possibly *not p*.

can do it because he is all-powerful. Evidence that Descartes held this view can be found in *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*:

We should note that even though the rule, ‘Whatever we can conceive of can exist’, is my own, it is true only so long as we are dealing with a conception which is clear and distinct, a conception which embraces the possibility of the thing in question, since God can bring about whatever we clearly perceive to be possible.<sup>86</sup>

God can at least do anything that Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives as possible.<sup>87</sup>

Under the Limited Possibilism interpretation, God could have made it possible that the negation of any eternal truth is true. That is, for any eternal truth  $p$ , it is possible that it is possible that not  $p$  is true. So, if God does in fact will that it is possible that not  $p$  is true, he has willed that a necessary truth be possibly false; but that would mean that he cannot then do the seemingly simpler task of willing that eternal truth to be *actually* false.<sup>88</sup> This violates the fairly weak condition for omnipotence that Descartes held. Bennett points out that on Curley’s reading, God could make it only contingently false that  $2+2=5$ , but He could not make it true for, if He could, then it would be possible; and if that is possible, then every proposition is possible.<sup>89</sup> The truth of any proposition whatsoever is exactly the result that Limited Possibilism tries to avoid. The main problem is that if God can make a proposition possibly possible, making the *possible* proposition true seems like it should be easy for God, especially on Descartes’ conception of God.

But perhaps Limited Possibilism wants to maintain God’s unlimited omnipotence and deny this result. Suppose, for example, that not only does God have control over whether some proposition is possible or not, but he also has control over the truth of the

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<sup>86</sup> *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*; CSM 1:299.

<sup>87</sup> For a similar passage, see 31 December 1640 letter to Mersenne; CSMK 166.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Kaufman, “Descartes’s Creation Doctrine,” 33.

<sup>89</sup> Bennett, “Modality,” 661.



proposition itself. If this is the case, Limited Possibilism can be reduced to Universal Possibilism. I will consider that the limited theory would face the same problems as the universal theory. It would render the terms like “necessary” or “impossible” vacuous in that every proposition would be possible; hence, it undermines Descartes’ doctrine of clear and distinct perception of both what is true and what is possible or impossible. In addition, some of his most foundational strategies would be in jeopardy, namely his *cogito* argument and ontological argument for the existence of God.

Van Cleve counters Curley’s proposal by arguing that if omnipotence holds sway over both modal and non-modal propositions, then Limited Possibilism really is reducible to Universal Possibilism. Using the same premises and logic as Curley, Van Cleve reaches the conclusion that for any proposition, that proposition is not necessary.<sup>90</sup> The only change is that Van Cleve assumes *any* proposition to be true rather than limiting his argument to necessary propositions. Van Cleve’s argument runs as follows: first he assumes Curley’s first two premises—namely, the premise that expresses the contingency of volition (if an agent wills that *p*, it is possible that he not so will), and the premise that expresses God’s omnipotence (a proposition is true if and only if God wills it to be true). Next he assumes the truth of some proposition *p*, and that if *p* is true, it follows that God wills *p*. Then, if God wills *p*, it follows that he could have not willed *p*, because he is omnipotent. So, he then shows that if *p* entails that God willed it, and it is possible that God did not will *p*; then it is also possible that *p* not obtain. In these steps, Van Cleve has shown that for any *p*, it is possible that not *p*. If you assume that anything at all is necessary, it would follow that that which is necessary is possibly not and, thus, possibly not necessary, which contradicts our assumption. So Van Cleve concludes that Limited

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<sup>90</sup> Van Cleve, “Destruction,” 60.

Possibilism leads to the same conclusion as Universal Possibilism. He finds that nothing is necessary and anything is possible as long as one assumes (1) the contingency of volition, (2) God's omnipotence (that is, that a proposition is true if and only if God wills it to be true), and (3) some proposition exists.<sup>91</sup>

It is important to note that Limited Possibilism could be saved if the second premise that expresses God's omnipotence is interpreted as saying that a necessary proposition is true if and only if God wills that necessary proposition to be true. Van Cleve acknowledges that it is possible to justify all the steps in Curley's argument without having to commit to the steps in Van Cleve's version of it. But he denies that there is any no plausible basis for allowing the interpretation of the premise that includes necessity without also recognizing how this holds for any proposition whatsoever.<sup>92</sup> But, the basis for allowing the limited interpretation of the premise is the same basis for holding the theory itself. So if one were to hold the limited interpretation of the premise, one would be bound to hold that the scope of God's power does not include the truth of the propositions themselves. In the end, Limited Possibilism leaves us with two unsatisfactory options: either restrict God's power or undermine Descartes' philosophical foundation.

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<sup>91</sup> For a formalization of Van Cleve's argument, see Appendix II.

<sup>92</sup> Van Cleve, "Destruction," 60.

## CHAPTER V

### CONTROLLED POSSIBILISM

The two interpretations I have thus far considered are unattractive as consistent, faithful readings of Descartes' creation doctrine. Universal Possibilism undermines some of Descartes' most important doctrines. Limited Possibilism is either reduced to Universal Possibilism or puts unwarranted restrictions on God's power. The reading I suggest, Controlled Possibilism, is consistent, true to Descartes' writings, supports his epistemic, theistic and metaphysical foundations and is not reducible to Universal Possibilism. However, it is reminiscent of both of these theories and draws from their conclusions. Controlled Possibilism is similar to the universal theory in that it holds the eternal truths to be contingent and it is similar to the limited theory in that it puts restrictions on God's power.

To support my line of reasoning, I will delve into the textual basis for Controlled Possibilism, especially passages wherein Descartes discusses the nature of necessity and contingency. Descartes explicitly defines what it is to be necessary and what it is to be contingent.<sup>93</sup> Controlled Possibilism applies Descartes' definitions of necessity, contingency and possibility. Something necessarily exists when it contains the idea of existence within itself. For Descartes, only the idea of a supremely perfect being necessarily exists, everything else is contingent. Hence, all eternal truths are contingent, but God's existence, and by extension his properties, are necessary. Controlled Possibilism argues that for any proposition *p*, if that proposition is "God exists" or if the proposition cannot be separated from the idea of a supremely perfect, necessarily

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<sup>93</sup> Descartes discusses these concepts in a number of passages, for example, *Principles of Philosophy* I. 14, (CSM 1:197-98); *The World* (CSM 1:97); and *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (CSM 1:45-46).

existent, being, then  $p$  necessarily exists. If not, then  $p$  is contingent and, thus, dependent upon God for both its existence (truth) and modal status. Because of Descartes' explicit distinction between God's necessary existence and the contingent existence of everything else, the eternal truths should be considered eternal truths, but not truths that exist necessarily.

After considering how my reading is motivated by and consistent with Descartes' writings, I will consider some advantages my theory holds: principally, I will discuss how my theory avoids the main problems that plague Universal Possibilism in that there *are* things that are necessary, namely God's existence and nature. Importantly, this preserves the foundation Descartes requires for his ontological argument, the *cogito* and clear and distinct perception. In addition, I avoid the Limited Possibility problems because God's power is not limited to control over only the modal properties of propositions; it also ranges over the truth or falsity of those propositions. The third advantage that Controlled Possibilism has is that it maintains the different meanings of modal intuitions. Under Universal Possibilism, everything is possible; thus to term a proposition necessary or impossible is vacuous. My theory, by contrast, preserves the grounding of a proposition's modal meaning.

Finally, I will entertain and answer two objections. The first is that God is, in fact, limited under this interpretation: he cannot know that he does not exist, for instance. In response to worries about such a claim, I will offer textual and linguistic reasons to uphold Controlled Possibilism. Textually, Descartes maintains God's necessary existence with extraordinary fervor and he never uses God's existence or characteristics as examples of something He has control over. Also, there is textual evidence that shows

that Descartes does place some limits on God. Linguistically, if the truth of all propositions depend on God, he must exist to continually ensure the truth of his non-existence or, if he does not really exist, the proposition “God does not exist” cannot be true, for there is nothing about which that proposition could be a proposition. The second objection considers whether Descartes is able to account for our lack of epistemic access to what God could have willed without making God out to be a deceiver. I argue that Descartes can account for this because what God made constitutes reality for both us and Himself. Furthermore, under Descartes’ definition of possibility, every proposition exists, but not every proposition is possible. For instance,  $2+3=4$  is not possible, but the proposition “ $2+3=4$ ” exists.

### *Textual Grounding for Controlled Possibilism*

Much is made of necessary truths and their relation to God, but it is important to note that Descartes himself tells us what constitutes the difference between a necessary truth and a contingent truth. Descartes discusses the distinction most clearly in *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* when discussing simple natures. A simple nature is something “which we know so clearly and distinctly that [it] cannot be divided by the mind into other [simple natures] which are more distinctly known.”<sup>94</sup> A conjunction of simple natures is necessary when the concept of one is implied in the concept of the other, and contingent when the relation joining them is not an inseparable one:

The conjunction between these simple things [simple natures] is either necessary or contingent. The conjunction is necessary when one of them is somehow implied (albeit confusedly) in the concept of the other so that we cannot conceive of either of them distinctly if we judge them to be separate from each other. It is in this way that shape is conjoined with extension, motion with duration or time,

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<sup>94</sup> *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule 12; CSM 1:44.

etc., because we cannot conceive of a shape which is completely lacking in extension, or a motion wholly lacking in duration. [...] The union between such things, however, is contingent when the relation conjoining them is not an inseparable one. This is the case when we say that a body is inanimate, that a man is dressed, etc. Again, there are many instances of things which are necessarily conjoined, even though most people count them as contingent, failing to notice the relation between them: for example the proposition, 'I am, therefore God exists', or 'I understand, therefore I have a mind distinct from my body.' Finally, we must note that very many necessary propositions, when converted, are contingent. Thus from the fact that I exist I may conclude with certainty that God exists, but from the fact that God exists I cannot legitimately assert that I too exist.<sup>95</sup>

This is an authoritative definition in Descartes' writings which allows us to find out what is necessary and what is not. We can determine whether a necessary connection exists between any two simple natures by conceiving whether the concept of one is implied in the concept of the other. If it turns out that we cannot distinctly perceive either of them if we judge them to be separate, their conjunction is necessary; if we can distinctly perceive them separately, it is a contingent connection.

The only thing that Descartes deems to have necessary existence is God. Using the above criterion, Descartes concludes God exists. In the same way that it is necessary that the three angles of a triangle equal two right angles because the idea of two right angles is contained within the idea of a triangle, so too is it necessary that God should exist, for existence is contained within the idea of a supremely perfect being:

The mind next considers the various ideas which it has within itself, and finds that there is one idea – the idea of a supremely intelligent, supremely powerful and supremely perfect being – which stands out from all the others. And it readily judges from what it perceives in this idea, that God, who is the supremely perfect being, is, or exists. For although it has distinct ideas of many other things, it does not observe anything in them to guarantee the existence of their object. In this one idea the mind recognizes existence – not merely the possible and contingent existence which belongs to the ideas of all other things which it distinctly perceives, but utterly necessary and eternal existence. Now on the basis of its perception that, for example, it is necessarily contained in the idea of a triangle

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<sup>95</sup> *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule 12; CSM 1:45-6.

that its three angles should equal two right angles, the mind is quite convinced that a triangle does have three angles equaling two right angles. In the same way, simply on the basis of its perception that necessary and eternal existence is contained in the idea of a supremely perfect being, the mind must clearly conclude that the supreme being does exist.<sup>96</sup>

God necessarily exists and only in the idea of a supremely perfect being does one find the idea of existence. Existence is a simple nature found in the conception of God, but in no other conception. If one tries to conceptualize a supremely perfect being apart from the idea of existence, one cannot conceive of it distinctly. Anything that does not have the idea of existence within it is not necessary and thus contingent. In all other ideas, presumably including the eternal truths, one does not find the idea of existence and, hence, all other ideas are contingent ideas:

The mind will be even more inclined to accept this if it considers that it cannot find within itself an idea of any other thing such that necessary existence is seen to be contained in the idea in this way. And from this it understands that the idea of a supremely perfect being is not an idea which was invented by the mind, or which represents some chimera, but that it represents a true and immutable nature which cannot but exist, since necessary existence is contained within it.<sup>97</sup>

Here we have very clear evidence that only a supremely perfect being necessarily exists, and in addition, Descartes argues that God possesses all perfections.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, Descartes clearly contends that all other ideas have only contingent existence. This coincides with the significant theme found in Descartes' writings that everything depends on God, but he is independent. We can know precisely what Descartes means when he says necessary or contingent. We do not have to rely on intuition to have access to Descartes' meanings for these words.

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<sup>96</sup> *Principles of Philosophy* I. 14; CSM 1:197-8.

<sup>97</sup> *Principles of Philosophy* I. 15; CSM 1:198.

<sup>98</sup> The perfections Descartes lists are: "eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, the source of all goodness and truth, the creator of all things and finally, that he possesses within him everything in which we can clearly recognize some perfection that is infinite or unlimited by any imperfection." *Principles of Philosophy* I. 22, CSM 1:200.

This is why Descartes called the eternal truths eternal rather than necessary. The ideas of the eternal truths do not imply existence. There are certain things that follow necessarily from the eternal truths, but their existence is not one of those things; existence is only contingent. While similar to Universal Possibilism, Controlled Possibilism is clearly a distinct interpretation, in that for Controlled Possibilism, there are some truths that are necessary, namely that God exists and has certain properties. In addition, this seems a bit like Limited Possibilism in that it restricts God's power. The important difference is that God wills both the modal properties and the actual truth of the eternal truths. So, the truths in question should be considered eternal, not necessary. Indeed, when Descartes refers to their existence, he usually, if not always, refers to them as eternal. He only, as far as I can tell, refers to the eternal truths as necessary once, in the 2 May 1644 Letter to Mesland, and there he only refers to them as contingently necessary.<sup>99</sup> I am not alone in noticing this feature in Descartes' thought, for Bennett seems to think he does not refer to them as necessary at all.<sup>100</sup>

### *Advantages of Controlled Possibilism*

Controlled Possibilism walks a delicate line between the all-encompassing possibility of the universal theory and the unwarranted restriction of the limited theory. While those theories are motivated by Descartes' texts regarding the eternal truths and God's omnipotence, Controlled Possibilism is motivated by a desire to construct a consistent union between those texts and Descartes' explicit definitions of the nature of necessary and contingent truths. My theory has three main advantages: first, I avoid the

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<sup>99</sup> 2 May 1644, Letter to Mesland, CSMK 235.

<sup>100</sup> Bennett, "Modality," 663.



principle problem of Universal Possibilism. Controlled Possibilism preserves the necessity of God's existence; it is not the deeply counterintuitive case that every proposition, indeed, every coherent string of words, is possible. This preserves the foundation Descartes requires for some of his most vital theories: clear and distinct perception, the ontological argument and the *cogito*. In addition, Controlled Possibilism retains the scope of God's ability that Descartes desires in his writings. God's power is not limited to control over only the modal properties of propositions, it ranges over the truth or falsity of all propositions. Finally, it preserves the meaning of possibility. Were every proposition possible, the modal notions that Descartes repeatedly relies on would be vacuous at best and inconsistent and incoherent at worst.

Controlled Possibilism avoids the main problem that faces Unlimited Possibilism, namely, that every proposition is possible. Descartes explicitly holds one thing to be necessary: the existence of a supremely perfect being. Recall that anything is necessary if it is implied or contained in the concept of another idea. He repeatedly proclaims that God necessarily exists because necessary and eternal existence is contained in the idea of a supremely perfect being. Furthermore, Descartes points out that God is the only thing with necessary existence.<sup>101</sup> And, if God's existence is necessary, not *every* proposition is possible and we can begin to be confident in the foundations of Descartes' philosophy.

As Frankfurt points out, if everything *is* possible, there is a gap between what we perceive to be true and what is actually true; but that gap is only to be understood relative to the character of our minds.<sup>102</sup> If we hold God, the supremely perfect being, to exist necessarily, there need no longer be a gap between what is conceivable and what is

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<sup>101</sup> *Principles of Philosophy*, I. 14; CSM 1:197-8.

<sup>102</sup> Frankfurt, "Creation," 45.

possible because God is the foundation of knowledge. One of the important necessary characteristics God has is that he is not a deceiver. Descartes holds that deception is an imperfection, but God is necessarily supremely perfect so He cannot deceive. Therefore God would not deceive us into thinking we know the truth, rather than that knowledge being merely an epistemic limit, as Frankfurt suggests. Descartes is certain of the necessity of the supreme perfection because the idea of each perfect characteristic is contained within his idea of God. Based on this foundation, Descartes' *cogito* and system of clear and distinct perception can flourish: since Descartes has an idea of a perfect being, and non-deception is a perfection, Descartes can be certain that God is not deceiving him. When Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives that something is real, that is the case, it is not merely an epistemic limit as Frankfurt's interpretation requires. As I have hopefully shown, Descartes' theory of necessary and contingent truths ground his ontological argument, *cogito* and method of clear and distinct perception.

Controlled Possibilism stays true to Descartes' sense of theism and keeps God as the creator of all things and the being upon whom all things depend. One of the major disadvantages of Limited Possibilism is that God's power is limited: it ranges over whether something is possible or not, but *not* over whether that possibility is true or not.<sup>103</sup> The Controlled Possibilism interpretation holds that not only does the possibility or impossibility of a proposition depend on God, but so also does the truth of the proposition itself. God is the creator of all things; so, for example, He creates what triangles are, whether triangles are possible, and whether triangles exist. In doing so, he understands and wills any necessary connections; for instance, the connection between

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<sup>103</sup> As Van Cleve has shown, if God's power also ranged over the actual truth of the proposition, Limited Possibilism would be reduced to Universal Possibilism.

the measure of the three interior angles of a triangle and the measure of two right angles. These sorts of connections are necessary, but the existence of these connections is contingent upon God's will.

According to Descartes, it is God's will, intellect and understanding that constantly and at once create what is and what is possible and impossible. Furthermore, the necessity of a conjunction of simple natures, such as shape and extension, cannot be reduced to mere possibility (as Van Cleve might argue), because necessity does not rest on whether God could have done otherwise. Given that God created triangles and angles a certain way, the conception of two right angles is contained within the idea of the three interior angles and so the conjunction is necessary even though the existence of the conjunction is not. It is very important to keep in mind that being implied in the concept of something is what necessity *is* for Descartes. Necessity is *not* whether God could have done otherwise.<sup>104</sup> Descartes' God clearly could have done otherwise as his power is without limit, but that does not make something non-necessary. A union between concepts is contingent if the relation conjoining them is not an inseparable one.<sup>105</sup> The union of existence and any other concept besides the concept of a supremely perfect being is not inseparable. Thus all things, including unions of concepts, depend on God for their existence.

Controlled Possibilism preserves the different meanings of modal intuitions. If everything were possible, the possible could no longer be opposed to the impossible.<sup>106</sup> It would turn out that there would be no sense in characterizing anything as possible since you would be saying nothing whatsoever. But Descartes often speaks about possibility

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<sup>104</sup> *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*; CSM 1:45-6.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Curley, "Eternal Truths," 593.

and impossibility (e.g., in talking about the possibility of the existence of material things, or the impossibility of both thinking and not existing at the same time). Universal Possibilism drains the term “possible” of its meaning, something that Descartes would evidently like to avoid. Indeed, in discussing the distinction between what he means by necessary and contingent, he also provides us a means to interpret his understanding of what is possible. For example, in response to an objection regarding his argument for the existence of God, in the *2nd Replies* he endorses the common meaning of “possibility”:

Hence, to deploy the objection which you go on to make, you should have denied the major premiss [sic] and said instead ‘What we clearly understand to belong to the nature of a thing cannot for that reason be affirmed of that thing unless its nature is possible, or non-contradictory.’ But please notice how weak this qualification is. If by ‘possible’ you mean what everyone commonly means, namely ‘whatever does not conflict with our human concepts’, then it is manifest that the nature of God, as I have described it, is possible in this sense, since I supposed it to contain only what, according to our clear and distinct perceptions, must belong to it; and hence it cannot conflict with our concepts. Alternatively, you may well be imagining some other kind of possibility which relates to the thing itself; but unless this matches the first sort of possibility it can never be known to the human intellect, and so it does not so much support a denial of God’s nature and existence as serve to undermine every other item of human knowledge.<sup>107</sup>

Here, Descartes contends that the nature of God is possible in the common sense, that is, non-contradictory. Further, if one were to adopt a sense of “possible” that relates to the thing itself, and it did not conform to the notion of “possible” that means non-contradictory, it would undermine every item of human knowledge. So, when Descartes talks of things being possible, he seems to mean that they are non-contradictory. When he uses the term “necessary,” he means that the concept of one simple nature is implied in the concept of the other and that we cannot distinctly conceive of them if we judge them

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<sup>107</sup> *2<sup>nd</sup> Replies*, CSM 2:107.

as separate. So the terms “contingent” and “impossible” are easily defined in terms of necessary and possible. A union of simple natures is contingent when the relation conjoining them is not inseparable, and something is impossible if it is self-contradictory. By both grounding the existence of propositions in God’s immutable and completely efficacious will and maintaining that there are necessary propositions, Descartes is thus able to preserve the semantic value of our modal intuitions.

### *First Set of Objections and Replies*

There are two main objections to Controlled Possibilism. First, under this interpretation God seems to be limited—something that seems to fly in the face of Descartes’ consistent proclamations that God is unlimited. Descartes does not exempt God’s existence in any certain, explicit way; so it would seem that propositions about the existence of God and his properties should likewise not be exempt from His will. This is certainly the most troubling objection, but under my interpretation God is not limited; He is necessary. Second, under this interpretation God may still be a deceiver in that we do not have epistemic access to what He could have willed but chose not to. Controlled Possibilism upholds God’s control over the existence and truth of all propositions; but is there still a conceptual gap between what is true and what could actually be the case?

According to the first objection God is limited under Controlled Possibilism. If God necessarily exists, and God necessarily has certain properties, then it does not follow that God has control over his own existence and his properties. In other words, God cannot do something, namely make himself not exist, be a deceiver, be powerless, etc. Under my interpretation it is self contradictory, and hence impossible, that God not exist;

however, Descartes says over and over that God is unlimited and can do anything. His letter to Mesland is the most obvious case in point:

It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible. The first consideration shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite. The second consideration assures us that even if this be true, we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so.<sup>108</sup>

Descartes does not say that God can do anything except have control over His existence.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, in many passages, Descartes explicitly says that God cannot have any limits, can accomplish everything that he conceives as possible and even things that he cannot conceive as possible.<sup>110</sup> It is worth noting that Descartes often merely claims that he cannot say what God cannot do when arguing that God can do the impossible. Descartes says that he will not go so far as to say that God cannot do what he cannot conceive. But, it is certainly evident from his writings that Descartes considers God to be a necessary being without limits. Controlled Possibilism seems to place restraints on God's power, namely that God must exist. For this to be true, that would imply that God could not make it so that He didn't exist. If that were the case, as Sartre argues, there is

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<sup>108</sup> 2 May 1644, Letter to Mesland; CSMK 235.

<sup>109</sup> Two other very similar passages appear in Descartes' letters to Arnauld (24 July 1648, CSMK 358-59) and More (5 February 1649, CSMK 363-64).

<sup>110</sup> I will leave the issue of whether the consideration that God cannot have limits constitutes a limit aside. Suffice it to say that God's lack of necessary limits is just that, a lack, not necessarily an imperfection. Furthermore, Descartes maintains that God can impose limits upon himself: "You say that you think it is 'very hard' to propose that there is anything immutable and eternal apart from God. You would be right to think this if I was talking about existing things, or if I was proposing something as immutable in the sense that its immutability was independent of God. But just as the poets suppose that the Fates were originally established by Jupiter, but that after they were established he bound himself to abide by them, so I do not think that the essences of things, and the mathematical truths which we can know concerning them, are independent of God." *5<sup>th</sup> Replies*, CSM 2:261.

one thing that I can do that God cannot: commit suicide. It would be folly to place any constraints on God's power because Descartes clearly held that there are none.

In order to alleviate the pressure of this doubt, I will offer two kinds of response, one textual, the other conceptual. First, I claim that the text allows, if not supports, my interpretation. Descartes uses the strongest language available to him in many places to argue that God must exist and it could not be otherwise.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, for him the very idea of God includes his "absolutely necessary" existence:

We have a conception or idea of God which is such that if we attend to the idea closely and thoroughly examine the issue in the way I have explained, we shall recognize, simply from this scrutiny, that it is not possible that God does not exist, since existence is contained in the concept of God – and not just possible or contingent existence, as in the ideas of all other things, but absolutely necessary and actual existence.<sup>112</sup>

Passages like this are so common in Descartes that, if a case is to be made that Descartes held any opinion whatsoever, it is that he held that the existence of God is necessary and cannot be otherwise. Not only can we see this from the texts, but also implicit in all of his other arguments. He bases nearly his entire philosophy on the existence of God, not to mention the possibility of human knowledge.<sup>113</sup> If we hold anything in Descartes' philosophy to be his one, certain, unshakable or unquestionable fact, it should be the necessity of God's existence, because Descartes argues for it so strongly and continually and never even questions the possibility that it is false.<sup>114</sup> Given the vehemence in his declaration of God's necessary existence, it seems reasonable to attribute to conclude that for Descartes, there is one limitation on God, namely that He cannot not exist.

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<sup>111</sup> For brevity's sake, I will give only the CSM references and not the titles to areas where Descartes discusses or mentions the certainty of God's existence: CSM 1: 46, 128, 129, 197-200, 221, 306. CSM 2: 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> *Meditation* arguments for God's necessary existence, 83, 97, 106-107, 115, 117, 262-263. CSMK: 24, 129, 184, 186, 196, 212, 239.

<sup>112</sup> *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*; CSM 1:306.

<sup>113</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> *Replies*; CSM 2:107.

<sup>114</sup> Except, of course, when he goes on to argue otherwise in the *Meditations*.

Second, Descartes never uses the possibility of God's making himself not exist as an example of His unlimited power. He makes some very strong claims, including the claim that God could make contraries exist together. He even says that God could make inconceivable propositions true, but he never contends that God could make himself cease to exist. I could give numerous examples of things God *can* do, but not one of God making it so that he does not exist. In fact, in a letter to either Mesland or Sainte-Croix—the addresses on the Latin fragments are uncertain—Descartes argues that it is an imperfection for God to be able to take away existence from himself:

Now, by a 'faculty' we normally mean some perfection; yet it would be an imperfection in God to be able to take away existence from himself. So to forestall any quibbling, I would prefer to put it as follows: 'It is a contradiction that God should take away from himself his own existence; or be able to lose it in some other way.'<sup>115</sup>

Descartes' purpose here is to clarify his doctrine that it would be a contradiction for God to make himself not exist. By Descartes' definition of "possible," it would also not be possible for God to not exist. In addition, it seems that Descartes holds that it would also be an imperfection; if that is so, the very idea of God limits any sort of imperfection, and thus nonexistence. So the view that God's power is limited by his own existence and nature is at least not completely destitute of textual support.

Third, it is not unreasonable to place some restraint on God because there is textual support for the contention that there are other things God could not do. That is, Descartes does consider possible limitations on God's power. God cannot, for instance, change in respect to what he's ordained.<sup>116</sup> As an example, in an early letter to Mersenne Descartes argues that the eternal truths are unchanging because God has willed them and

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<sup>115</sup> March 1642, Letter to \*\*\*\*; CSMK 212.

<sup>116</sup> Blake Dutton, "Indifference, Necessity, and Descartes's Derivation of the Laws of Motion," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 34 (1996): 204-205.



his will is unchangeable, though free.<sup>117</sup> Descartes has no compunction about saying that God cannot do something. For instance, God cannot go against his own will.

Furthermore, God's omnipotence is not impugned if He cannot do some things we deem impossible:

For we do not take it as a mark of impotence when someone cannot do something which we do not understand to be possible, but only when he cannot do something which we distinctly perceive to be possible. Now we certainly perceive it to be possible for an atom to be divided, since we suppose it to be extended; and so, if we judge that it cannot be divided by God, we shall judge that God cannot do one of the things which we perceive to be possible.<sup>118</sup>

Here, Descartes is saying that if God cannot do something that we judge impossible, it is not a mark of impotence, and it only limits God's omnipotence if he cannot do something that we perceive to be possible. Therefore, if it is impossible that God contravene what he has ordained, then that is not a mark of impotence. We can understand Descartes' claim that the eternal truths would be true in any world God could create in the sense that He cannot contravene what He has ordained:<sup>119</sup>

The truths, I say, according to which God himself has taught us that he has arranged all things in number, weight and measure. The knowledge of these truths is so natural to our souls that we cannot but judge them infallible when we conceive them distinctly, nor doubt that if God had created many worlds, they would be as true in each of them as in this one.<sup>120</sup>

Descartes contends that we judge the eternal truths to be infallible and we cannot doubt that they would be as true in any world God creates. This places at least some limitation on God's power.

From a conceptual standpoint, the proposition "God can make himself not exist" is either certainly false (i.e., it can never be true) or is nonsense. That is, God has to

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<sup>117</sup> 15 April 1630, Letter to Mersenne; CSMK 22.

<sup>118</sup> 5 February 1649, Letter to More; CSMK 363-4.

<sup>119</sup> For a similar passage, also see *Discourse on the Method*, Part 5; CSM 1:132.

<sup>120</sup> *The World*, Ch 7; CSM 1:97.

*continue to exist* to ensure the proposition is true. If, however, God actually attempts to make the proposition true, then he would cease to exist as soon as the attempt was made. Nothing would exist that would make the proposition true. If the truth of the proposition is possible, it can only be possible in the sense of possibility under Universal Possibilism: it would drain all meaning from the term and the proposition would have no sense.

In other words, the proposition “God can make Himself not exist” certainly is not part of God’s necessary nature, so it is dependent upon God for its truth just like every other proposition. Combine this with Descartes’ contention that everything depends on God’s continual concurrence to exist and we see that God is independent and must continually exist to ensure the continued truth of the proposition, thus making the proposition false. If, on the other hand, we were to assume the actual truth of that proposition we would see that it could never be true. As soon as God willed it to be true, he would cease to exist. If God ceases to exist nothing is true and there is nothing more to say of truth or falsity. If this is the case, the proposition is not true, but neither is it false: it is nothing and nothing can be said of it. Finally, if it is somehow possible to bring about the proposition, that possibility would be a vacuous concept. A possibility that could not be opposed to impossibility would be devoid of all meaning and would thus have no sense. Thus through analysis of the language we can see that there is some question whether this objection constitutes a limitation on God’s power.

Another telling objection against Controlled Possibilism is that if there are more things that are possible than we conceive, there is a gap between what is actually true and what our reasoning tells us is true.<sup>121</sup> If Descartes’ considered position is in fact expressed by Controlled Possibilism, it seems to run into one of the same problems that

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<sup>121</sup> As discussed earlier, pages 11-12.

hampered the Universal Possibilist interpretation. If any proposition is possible, our intuitions about possibility and impossibility do not conform to the actual reality of God and the angels. If the possibility of any proposition depends on God's power, any proposition is possibly true. If *any* proposition is possibly true, nothing is impossible or necessary. The only exception to this is the necessary existence of a supremely perfect being, and all else is contingent. But it is clear that Descartes holds some things to be impossible, for instance that the interior angles of a triangle can be anything other than equal to two right angles. Furthermore, he holds that when we perceive something clearly and distinctly, we can be certain of its truth. We can be certain of its truth because God would not deceive us. Not only can we be certain as to the truth of a proposition, but we can also be certain of modal notions, such as possibility or impossibility. If Controlled Possibilism holds, Descartes' doctrine of clear and distinct perception is undermined. Every step in his deductions can be questioned because for any eternal law that Descartes claims to know, the opposite can also be the case. This is particularly significant when considered in regards to Descartes' physics and his *cogito*.

Two options are open to defend Controlled Possibilism. The first is that everything actually created by God makes up what is real for both God and us. While God could have made  $2+2=5$ , he did not. Furthermore, it is eternally true that  $2+2=4$  and nothing else. God made it that there is a necessary connection between 2 and 4 when he willed the existence and essence of these numbers. The second option for defending Controlled Possibilism is that the propositions themselves exist; in fact all propositions exist, but not every proposition is true in and of itself. So, " $2+3=4$ " is not possible as it is self-contradictory, but "it is within God's power to have made  $2+3=4$ " is possible

because it is not self-contradictory, as long as one understands God's power as Descartes does.

The first way, then, to preserve God's perfection under Controlled Possibilism is to consider everything created by God constituting reality for God. It is consistent to hold that all propositions depend on God's power, but not every string of words or symbols that constitutes an meaningful proposition is possibly true. For instance, God did not bring it about that  $3+4 \neq 7$ . Indeed, that 3 and 4 do not make 7 cannot be true because God made an addition and equality relation between 3, 4 and 7 when he willed the existence of these numbers. This connection between 3, 4 and 7 is not possibly false because the negation of that relation is inconsistent with what is created by God; the negation of  $3+4=7$  is not in the realm of reality. Only the proposition expressing the possibility of the negation is within the realm of what God creates, but not the possibility itself. That is, " $3+4 \neq 7$ " is in the realm of reality, but  $3+4 \neq 7$  is not. The sense of possibility which threatens to undermine Controlled Possibilism is the sense in which something could be true in our reality. In this way, Descartes draws a sharp distinction between two senses of possibility. For him "possible" denotes anything that does not conflict with our human concepts, not anything God could have brought about.

The second way of preserving Descartes' method of clear and distinct perception is to consider that every proposition exists, but not every proposition is possible. Certainly the proposition "it is possible that  $3+4 \neq 7$ " is possible. It is possible in the sense that the words themselves can be put together coherently and express meaning. But the actual negation of this necessary connection and the negation of the existence of the eternal truth,  $3+4=7$ , are not possible. Every proposition can be willed or understood by

God, and is possible in the sense that God could have willed that proposition instead of the ones he did, but not possible in the Cartesian sense that it is not self-contradictory given the reality that God understands and wills. For instance, “ $2+3=4$ ” is not possible given the concepts of 2, 3, 4, the addition relation and the equality relation. But the proposition “God could have chosen to will  $2+3=4$ ” is possible as it is not self-contradictory. This interpretation preserves the certainty of knowledge of both the truth of a proposition and its modal status.

Controlled Possibilism thus incorporates a wider range of Descartes’ writings than are traditionally considered in order to render his creation doctrine consistent. Understanding Descartes’ doctrine regarding necessity and possibility clarifies his conception of God’s power and His relation to the limits of possibility. This understanding preserves God’s necessary existence as well as clear and distinct perception, Descartes’ method to find the truth of propositions. Though these results are quite advantageous, God may be limited by His inability to render himself non-existent. Fortunately, there is ample textual evidence that supports a reading limiting the scope of God’s power to only dependent things. In addition, the objection that God must be able to ensure His non-existence to be omnipotent may be incoherent when compared to the meanings underlying the objection. Furthermore, the concern that God might be a deceiver or that there may be a gap between what is conceivable and what is real for God and the angels is allayed by the fact that what God understands and wills is real for God, the angels and us. He cannot contravene what He has ordained, and He has ordained some things true and other things false. Even though He could have done other than He did, what He *did* do is what matters. In addition, it is not as though we cannot conceive of

what He could have done; we just recognize it as untrue. All propositions exist, and we recognize the possibility in a proposition such as “God could have willed that there be square circles,” or that God could have willed some other necessarily false proposition.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

There is significant tension in Descartes' philosophy between God's unquestionable existence and His limitless power. The three interpretations I have considered relieve this tension in different ways. On the one hand, Universal Possibilism takes God's limitless power as primitive and interprets the rest of Descartes' philosophy through this lens. The result is a deceptive God and an epistemic wedge between objective and subjective reality. The foundation cracks under each of the theories that Descartes worked so hard to build. Limited Possibilism, on the other hand, holds God's character and our non-deceptive relationship with Him paramount. To relieve the tension between God's power and existence, the theory puts God in control of only the modal status of propositions; God can make anything possibly possible. The only drawback to this line of reasoning is that God does not have control over the truth of a given proposition that he has made possibly possible. This is an odd constraint on God's power. He can make anything possibly possible, but He cannot make the possible true.

Controlled Possibilism endeavors to consider Descartes' conception of possibility and necessity to lessen the tension between God's existence and power. The main advantage of this interpretation is that it maintains the necessary existence of God, preserves the foundation of Descartes' theories, and retains the scope of God's power over not only the possibility of a proposition but also the truth of a proposition. I conclude that God is limited in only by His existence, which is the most insignificant manner that Descartes could consistently suggest. I also conclude that although God

could have made things we cannot conceive possible, God is not a deceiver. What God wills constitutes reality for God, the angels, Descartes, and all people for all time.



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## APPENDIX A

Edwin Curley's formal argument for Limited Possibilism.<sup>122</sup>

L = it is necessary that, M = it is possible that, g=God.

- |                      |     |  |
|----------------------|-----|--|
| A                    | 1.  | $\forall x \forall y (Wxy \rightarrow M \neg Wxy)$             |
| A                    | 2.  | $\forall y (y \leftrightarrow Wgy)$                            |
| A                    | 3.  | $\exists y Ly$   |
| 3, $\exists E$       | 4.  | $La$   |
| 2, $\forall E$       | 5.  | $La \rightarrow WgLa$  |
| 1, $\forall E$       | 6.  | $WgLa \rightarrow M \neg WgLa$                                 |
| 4, 6 $\rightarrow E$ | 7.  | $M \neg WgLa$  |
| 7, 3                 | 8.  | $M \neg La$  |
| 4, 8 $\rightarrow I$ | 9.  | $La \rightarrow M \neg La$                                     |
| 9, $\forall I$       | 10. | $\forall x (Lx \rightarrow M \neg Lx)$                         |
| 10                   | 11. | $\forall x (Lx \rightarrow M \neg Lx) \approx \forall x (MMx)$ |

1. W is a two place predicate where ...Wills... For any x and any y, if x wills y, it is possible that it is not the case that x wills y.
2. A proposition is true if and only if God wills it to be true
3. There is something that is necessary
4. This is that thing that is necessary
5. This is an instance of 2: God wills the thing that is necessary.
6. This is an instance of 1: God could have not willed that thing.
7. From 4 and 6 (transitivity).
8. This is from the principle that:  $(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (M \neg q \rightarrow M \neg p)$
9. From 4 through 8.
10. As 'La' was a randomly selected necessary truth, we can generalize 9.
11. These are equivalent.

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<sup>122</sup> Curley, "Eternal Truth," 580-81.

## APPENDIX B

James Van Cleve's formal argument for the reduction of Limited Possibilism to Universal Possibilism.<sup>123</sup>

L = it is necessary that, M = it is possible that, g=God.

- |                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| A                    | 1. $\forall x \forall y (Wxy \rightarrow M\neg Wxy)$           |
| A                    | 2. $\forall y (y \leftrightarrow Wgy)$                         |
| A                    | 3. a   |
| 2, $\forall E$       | 4. $a \rightarrow Wga$   |
| 1, $\forall E$       | 5. $Wga \rightarrow M\neg Wga$                                 |
| 3-5 $\rightarrow E$  | 6. $M\neg Wga$   |
| 6, 2                 | 7. $M\neg a$   |
| 3, 7 $\rightarrow I$ | 8. $a \rightarrow M\neg a$                                     |
| 8, $\forall I$       | 9. $\forall x (x \rightarrow M\neg x)$                         |
| 9                    | 10. $\forall x (x \rightarrow M\neg x) \approx \forall x (Mx)$ |

1. W is a two place predicate where ...Wills.... For any x and any y, if x wills y, it is possible that it is not the case that x wills y.
2. A proposition is true if and only if God wills it to be true
3. Assumption for conditional proof.
4. This is an instance of 2: if something exists, God wills it.
5. This is an instance of 1: God could have not willed that thing.
6. From 3, 4 and 5 (with transitivity).
7. This is from the principle that:  $(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (M\neg q \rightarrow M\neg p)$
8. From 3 through 7.
9. As 'a' was a randomly selected truth, we can generalize 8.
10. These are equivalent.

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<sup>123</sup> Van Cleve, "Destruction," 59-60.

## APPENDIX C

### LIST OF QUOTES

From *Letters* (in Chronological order):

15 April, 1630, Letter to Mersenne,  
CSMK 22-23:

Your question of theology is beyond my mental capacity, but it does not seem to me outside my province, since it has no concern with anything dependent on revelation, which is what I call theology in the strict sense; it is a metaphysical question which is to be examined by human reason. I think that all those to whom God has given the use of this reason have an obligation to employ it principally in the endeavour [sic] to know him and to know themselves. However, in my treatise on physics I shall discuss a number of metaphysical topics and especially the following. The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures. Indeed to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates. Please do not hesitate to assert and proclaim everywhere that it is God who has laid down these laws in nature just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom. There is no single one that we cannot grasp if our mind turns to consider it. They are all inborn in our minds just as a king would imprint his laws on the hearts of all his subjects if he had enough power to do so. The greatness of God, on the other hand, is something which we cannot grasp even though we know it. But the very fact that we judge it beyond our grasp makes us esteem it the more greatly; just as a king has more majesty when he is less familiarly known by his subjects, provided of course that they do not get the idea that they have no king – they must know him enough to be in no doubt about that.

It will be said that if God had established these truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. ‘But I understand them to be eternal and unchangeable.’ – I make the same judgement [sic] about God. ‘But his will is free.’ – Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power.

I hope to put this in writing, within the next fortnight, in my treatises on physics; but I do not want you to keep it secret. On the contrary I beg you to tell people as often as the occasion demands, provided you do not mention my name. I should be glad to know the objections which can be made against this view; and I want people to get used to speaking of God in a manner worthier, I think, than the common and almost universal way of imagining him as a finite being.

6 May, 1630, Letter to Mersenne,  
CSMK 24:

As for the eternal truths, I say once more that they are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible. They are not known as true by God in any way which would imply that they are true independently of him. If men really understood the sense of their words they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of anything is prior to the knowledge which God has of it. In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true. So we must not say that if God did not exist nevertheless these truths would be true; for the existence of God is the first and the most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone all others proceed. It is easy to be mistaken about this because most people do not regard God as a being who is infinite and beyond our grasp, the sole author on whom all things depend; they stick at the syllables of his name and think it sufficient knowledge of him to know that 'God' means what is meant by *Deus* in Latin and what is adored by men. Those who have no higher thoughts than these can easily become atheists; and because they perfectly comprehend mathematical truths and do not perfectly comprehend the truth of God's existence, it is no wonder they do not think the former depend on the latter. But they should rather take the opposite view, that since God is a cause whose power surpasses the bounds of human understanding, and since the necessity of these truths does not exceed our knowledge, these truths are therefore something less than, and subject to, the incomprehensible power of God. What you say about the production of the *Word* does not conflict, I think, with what I say; but I do not want to involve myself in theology, and I am already afraid that you will think my philosophy too free-thinking for daring to express an opinion about such lofty matters.

27 May, 1630, Letter to Mersenne,  
CSMK 25:

You ask me by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say, as their efficient and total cause. For it is certain that he is the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths. I do not conceive them as emanating from God like rays from the sun; but I know that God is the author of everything and that these truths are something and consequently that he is their author. I say that I know this, not that I conceive or grasp it; because it is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful although our soul, being finite, cannot grasp or conceive him. In the same way we can touch a mountain with our hands but we cannot put our arms around it as we could put them around a tree or something else not too large for them. To grasp something is to embrace it in one's thought; to know something, it is sufficient to touch it with one's thought.

You ask also what necessitate God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal – just as free as he was not to create the world. And it is certain that these truths are no more

necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things. You ask what God did in order to produce them. I reply that from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them. Or, if you reserve the word created for the existence of things, then he established them and made them. In God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same things without one being prior to the other even conceptually.

27 May, 1638, Letter to Mersenne,  
CSMK 102-103:

2. You ask whether there would be real space, as there is now, if God had created nothing. At first this question seems to be beyond the capacity of the human mind, like infinity, so that it would be unreasonable to discuss it; but in fact I think that it is merely beyond the capacity of our imagination, like the questions of the existence of God and of the human soul. I believe that our intellect can reach the truth of the matter, which is, in my opinion, that not only would there not be any space, but even those truths which are called eternal – as that ‘the whole is greater than its part’ – would not be truths if God had not so established, as I think I wrote you once before...

31 December, 1640, Letter to Mersenne,  
CSMK 166:

It seems very clear to me that possible existence is contained in everything which we clearly understand, because from the fact that we clearly understand something it follows that it can be created by God.

August, 1641, Letter to Hyperaspistes,  
CSMK 193-4:

Secondly, it would not follow that anything can be kept in being without the influence of God, for truths may often be illustrated by a false example, and it is much more certain that nothing can exist without the concurrence of God than that there can be no sunlight without the sun. There is no doubt that if God withdrew his concurrence, everything which he has created would immediately go to nothing; because all things were nothing until God created them and lent them his concurrence.

August, 1641, Letter to Hyperaspistes,  
CSMK 194:

There is no force in what you say about the nature of a triangle. As I have insisted in several places, when God or the infinite is in question, we must consider not what we can comprehend – for we know that they are quite beyond our comprehension – but only what conclusions we can reach by an argument that is certain. To find what kind of causal dependence these truths have on God, see my replies to the Sixth Objections, article 8.

March, 1642, Letter to \*\*\*\*\*,  
CSMK 212:

**Note:** *This is from a letter to either Mesland or Sainte-Croix, the addresses on the Latin fragments are uncertain.*

Now, by a 'faculty' we normally mean some perfection; yet it would be an imperfection in God to be able to take away existence from himself. So to forestall any quibbling, I would prefer to put it as follows: 'It is a contradiction that God should take away from himself his own existence; or be able to lose it in some other way.'

2 May, 1644, Letter to Mesland,  
CSMK pg235:

I turn now to the difficulty of conceiving how God would have been acting freely and indifferently if he had made it false that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories could not be true together. It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible. The first consideration shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite. The second consideration assures us that even if this be true, we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so. And even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it. I agree that there are contradictions which are so evident that we cannot put them before our minds without judging them entirely impossible, like the one which you suggest: 'that God might have brought it about that his creatures were independent of him'. But if we would know the immensity of his power we should not put these thoughts before our minds, nor should we conceive any precedence or priority between his intellect and his will; for the idea which we have of God teaches us that there is in him only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure. This is well expressed by the words of St Augustine: 'They are so because thou see'st them to be so'; because in God *seeing* and *willing* are one and the same thing.

29 July 1648, Letter to Arnauld,  
CSMK 358-9:

6. The difficulty in recognizing the impossibility of a vacuum seems to arise primarily because we do not sufficiently consider that nothing can have no properties; otherwise, seeing that there is true extension in the space we call empty, and consequently all the properties necessary for the nature of body, we would not say that it was wholly empty, that is, mere nothingness. Secondly, it



arises because we have recourse to the divine power: knowing this to be infinite, we attribute to it an effect without noticing that the effect involves a contradictory conception, that is, is inconceivable by us. But I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or a sum of 1 and 2 which is not 3; such things involve a contradiction in my conception. I think the same should be said of a space which is wholly empty, or of an extended piece of nothing, or of a limited universe; because no limit to the world can be imagined without its being understood that there is extension beyond it; and no barrel can be conceived to be so empty as to have inside it no extension, and therefore no body; for wherever extension is, there, of necessity, is body also.

5 February, 1649, Letter to More,  
CSMK 363:

2[...]

But you are quite ready to admit that in the natural course of events there is no vacuum: you are concerned about God's power, which you think can take away the contents of a container while preventing its sides from meeting. For my part, I know that my intellect is finite and God's power is infinite, and so I set no limits to it; I consider only what I am capable of perceiving, and what not, and I take great pains that my judgement [sic] should accord with my perception. And so I boldly assert that God can do everything which I perceive to be possible, but I am not so bold as to assert the converse, namely that he cannot do what conflicts with my conception of things – I merely say that it involves a contradiction. And so, since I see that it conflicts with my way of conceiving things for all body to be taken out of a container and for there to remain an extension which I conceive in no way differently than I previously conceived the body contained in it, I say that it involves a contradiction that such an extension should remain there after the body has been taken away. I conclude that the sides of the container must come together. This is altogether in accord with my other opinions. For I say elsewhere that all motion is in a manner circular; from which it follows that it cannot be distinctly understood that God should remove some body from a container unless we understand at the same time that another body, or the sides of the container, should move into its place by a circular motion.

5 February, 1649, Letter to More,  
CSMK 363-4:

3. In the same way I say that it involves a contradiction that there should be any atoms which are conceived as extended and at the same time indivisible. Though God might make them such that they could not be divided by any creature, we certainly cannot understand that he might deprive himself of the power of dividing them. Your comparison with things which have been done and cannot be undone is not to the point. For we do not take it as a mark of impotence when someone cannot do something which we do not understand to be possible, but

only when he cannot do something which we distinctly perceive to be possible. Now we certainly perceive it to be possible for an atom to be divided, since we suppose it to be extended; and so, if we judge that it cannot be divided by God, we shall judge that God cannot do one of the things which we perceive to be possible. But we do not in the same way perceive it to be possible for what is done to be undone – on the contrary, we perceive it to be altogether impossible, and so it is no defect of power in God not to do it. The case is different with the divisibility of matter; for though I cannot count all the parts into which it is divisible (and which I say are on that account indefinite in number), yet I cannot assert that their division by God could never be completed, because I know that God can do more things that I can encompass within my thought. Indeed I agreed in article 34 [*Principles*, CSM I, 239] that such indefinite division of certain parts of matter sometimes actually takes place.

*From Rules for the Direction of the Mind:*

Written about 1628, unpublished during Descartes' lifetime.

*Rule 12 –*

*Finally we must make use of all the aids which intellect, imagination...*

CSM I 44:

Yet with respect to our intellect we call it a composite made up of these three natures, because we understood each of them separately before we were in a position to judge that the three of them are encountered at the same time in one and the same subject. That is why, since we are concerned here with things only in so far as they are perceived by the intellect, we term 'simple' only those things which we know so clearly and distinctly that they cannot be divided by the mind into others which are more distinctly known. Shape, extension and motion, etc. are of this sort; all the rest we conceive to be in a sense composed out of these.

CSM I 45-6:

Fourthly, the conjunction between these simple things [simple natures] is either necessary or contingent. The conjunction is necessary when one of them is somehow implied (albeit confusedly) in the concept of the other so that we cannot conceive of either of them distinctly if we judge them to be separate from each other. It is in this way that shape is conjoined with extension, motion with duration or time, etc., because we cannot conceive of a shape which is completely lacking in extension, or a motion wholly lacking in duration. Similarly, if I say that 4 and 3 make 7, the composition is a necessary one, for we do not have a distinct conception of the number 7 unless in a confused sort of way we include 3 and 4 in it. In the same way, whatever we demonstrate concerning figures or numbers necessarily links up with that of which it is affirmed. This necessity applies not just to things which are perceivable by the senses but to others as well. If, for example, Socrates says that he doubts everything, it necessarily follows that he understands at least that he is doubting, and hence that he knows that something can be true or false, etc.; for there is a necessary connection between

these facts and the nature of doubt. The union between such things, however, is contingent when the relation conjoining them is not an inseparable one. This is the case when we say that a body is inanimate, that a man is dressed, etc. Again, there are many instances of things which are necessarily conjoined, even though most people count them as contingent, failing to notice the relation between them: for example the proposition, 'I am, therefore God exists', or 'I understand, therefore I have a mind distinct from my body.' Finally, we must note that very many necessary propositions, when converted, are contingent. Thus from the fact that I exist I may conclude with certainty that God exists, but from the fact that God exists I cannot legitimately assert that I too exist.

From *The World*:

Written on or about 1629-33, unpublished during Descartes' lifetime

#### Chapter 7 – The Laws of Nature of this New World

CSM I 97:

But I shall be content with telling you that apart from the three laws I have expounded, I do not wish to suppose any others but those which follow inevitable from the eternal truths on which mathematicians have usually based their most certain and most evident demonstrations – the truths, I say, according to which God himself has taught us that he has arranged all things in number, weight and measure. The knowledge of these truths is so natural to our souls that we cannot but judge them infallible when we conceive them distinctly, nor doubt that if God had created many worlds, they would be as true in each of them as in this one. Thus those who are able to examine sufficiently the consequences of these truths and of our rules will be able to recognize effects by their causes. To express myself in scholastic terms, they will be able [sic] to have *a priori* demonstrations of everything that can be produced in this new world.

From *Principles of Philosophy, Part 1, The Principles of Human Knowledge*:

Written 1644.

CSM I 197-8:

*14. The existence of God is validly inferred from the fact that necessary existence is included in our concept of God.*

The mind next considers the various ideas which it has within itself, and finds that there is one idea – the idea of a supremely intelligent, supremely powerful and supremely perfect being – which stands out from all the others. And it readily judges from what it perceives in this idea, that God, who is the supremely perfect being, is, or exists. For although it has distinct ideas of many other things it does not observe anything in them to guarantee the existence of their object. In this one idea the mind recognizes existence – not merely the possible and contingent existence which belongs to the ideas of all other things which it distinctly

perceives, but utterly necessary and eternal existence. Now on the basis of its perception that, for example, it is necessarily contained in the idea of a triangle that its three angles should equal two right angles, the mind is quite convinced that a triangle does have three angles equaling two right angles. In the same way, simply on the basis of its perception that necessary and eternal existence is contained in the idea of a supremely perfect being, the mind must clearly conclude that the supreme being does exist.

CSM I 198:

*15. Our concepts of other things do not similarly contain necessary existence, but merely contingent existence.*

The mind will be even more inclined to accept this if it considers that it cannot find within itself an idea of any other thing such that necessary existence is seen to be contained in the idea in this way. And from this it understands that the idea of a supremely perfect being is not an idea which was invented by the mind, or which represents some chimera, but that it represents a true and immutable nature which cannot but exist, since necessary existence is contained within it.

CSM I 201:

*23. God is not corporeal, and does not perceive through the senses as we do; and he does not will the evil of sin.*

[...]

And even his understanding and willing does not happen, as in our case, by means of operations that are in a certain sense distinct from one another; we must rather suppose that there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything. When I say 'everything' I mean all *things*: for God does not will the evil of sin, which is not a thing

CSM I 207:

*43. We never go wrong when we assent only to what we clearly and distinctly perceive.*

It is certain, however, that we will never mistake the false for the true provided we give our assent only to what we clearly and distinctly perceive. I say that this is certain because God is not a deceiver, and so the faculty of perception which he has given us cannot incline to falsehood; and the same goes for the faculty of assent, provided its scope is limited to what is clearly perceived. And even if there were no way of proving this, the minds of all of us have been so moulded [sic] by nature that whenever we perceive something clearly, we spontaneously give our assent to it and are quite unable to doubt its truth.

CSM I 208:

*48. All the objects of our perception may be regarded either as things or affections of things, or as eternal truths. The former are listed here.*

All the objects of our perception we regard either as things, or affections of things [quality or mode], or else as eternal truths which have no existence outside our thought. [follows a list of things and classes of things]

CSM I 209:

*49. It is not possible – or indeed necessary – to give a similar list of eternal truths.*

Everything in the preceding list we regard either as a thing or as a quality or mode of a thing. But when we recognize that it is impossible for anything to come from nothing, the proposition *Nothing comes from nothing* is regarded not as a really existing thing, or even as a mode of a thing, but as an eternal truth which resides within our mind. Such truths are termed common notions or axioms. The following are examples of this class: *It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time; What is done cannot be undone; He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks*; and countless others. It would not be easy to draw up a list of all of them; but nonetheless we cannot fail to know them when the occasion for thinking about them arises, provided that we are not blinded by preconceived notions.

CSM I 211:

*56. What modes, qualities and attributes are.*

By *mode*, as used above, we understand exactly the same as what is elsewhere meant by an *attribute* or *quality*. But we employ the term *mode* when we are thinking of a substance as being affected or modified; when the modification enables the substance to be designated as a substance of such and such a kind, we use the term *quality*; and finally, when we are simply thinking in a more general way of what is in a substance, we use the term *attribute*. Hence we do not, strictly speaking, say that there are modes or qualities in God, but simply attributes, since in the case of God, any variation is unintelligible.

From *The Meditations and Objections and Replies*:

1<sup>st</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> set of objections/replies: 1641

7<sup>th</sup> set: 1642

5<sup>th</sup> Meditation, 1641

CSM II 47:

First of all, there is the fact that, apart from God, there is nothing else of which I am capable of thinking such that existence belongs to its essence. Second, I cannot understand how there could be two or more Gods of this kind; and after supposing that one God exists, I plainly see that it is necessary that he has existed from eternity and will abide for eternity. And finally, I perceive many other attributes of God, none of which I can remove or alter.

2<sup>nd</sup> Replies, 1641, Replies to objections compiled and made mostly by Mersenne.  
CSM II 107:

Hence, to deploy the objection which you go on to make, you should have denied the major premiss [sic] and said instead 'What we clearly understand to belong to the nature of a thing cannot for that reason be affirmed of that thing unless its nature is possible, or non-contradictory.' But please notice how weak this qualification is. If by 'possible' you mean what everyone commonly means, namely 'whatever does not conflict with our human concepts', then it is manifest that the nature of God, as I have described it, is possible in this sense, since I supposed it to contain only what, according to our clear and distinct perceptions, must belong to it; and hence it cannot conflict with our concepts. Alternatively, you may well be imagining some other kind of possibility which relates to the thing itself; but unless this matches the first sort of possibility it can never be known to the human intellect, and so it does not so much support a denial of God's nature and existence as serve to undermine every other item of human knowledge.

5<sup>th</sup> Replies, 1<sup>st</sup> point, 1641, *Objections raised against the Fifth Meditation*,  
CSM II 261:

You say that you think it is 'very hard' to propose that there is anything immutable and eternal apart from God. You would be right to think this if I was talking about existing things, or if I was proposing something as immutable in the sense that its immutability was independent of God. But just as the poets suppose that the Fates were originally established by Jupiter, but that after they were established he bound himself to abide by them, so I do not think that the essences of things, and the mathematical truths which we can know concerning them, are independent of God. Nevertheless, I do think that they are immutable and eternal, since the will and decree of God willed and decreed that they should be so. Whether you think this is hard or easy to accept, it is enough for me that it is true.

6<sup>th</sup> Objections, 8<sup>th</sup> difficulty, 1641  
CSM II 281:

The *eighth* difficulty arises out of your reply to the Fifth Set of Objections. How can the truths of geometry or metaphysics, such as those you refer to, be immutable and eternal and yet not be independent of God? What sort of causal dependence on God do they have? Could he have brought it about that there has never been any such thing as the nature of a triangle? And how, may we ask, could he have made it untrue from eternity that twice four makes eight, or that a triangle has three angles? Either these truths depend solely on the intellect that is thinking of them, or on existing things, or else they are independent, since it seems that God could not have brought it about that any of these essences or truths were not as they were from all eternity.

6<sup>th</sup> Replies, Article 6, 1641  
CSM II 291:

6. As for the freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. I am not speaking here of temporal priority: I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of 'rationally determined reason' as they call it, such that God's idea of the good impelled him to choose one thing rather than another. For example, God did not will the creation of the world in time because he saw that it would be better this way than if he had created it from eternity; nor did he will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise, and so on. On the contrary, it is because he willed to create the world in time that it is better this way than if he had created it from eternity; and it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise; and so on in other cases.

6<sup>th</sup> Replies, Article 8, 1641

CSM II 293:

8. If anyone attends to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on him. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good. If this were not so, then, as noted a little earlier, God would not have been completely indifferent with respect to the creation of what he did in fact create. If some reason for something's being good had existed prior to his preordination, this would have determined God to prefer those things which it was best to do. But on the contrary, just because he resolved to prefer those things which are now to be done, for this very reasons, in the words of Genesis, 'they are very good'; in other words. The reason for their goodness depends on the fact that he exercised his will to make them so. There is no need to ask what category of causality is applicable to the dependence of this goodness upon God, or to the dependence on him of other truths, both mathematical and metaphysical. For since the various kinds of cause were enumerated by thinkers who did not, perhaps, attend to this type of causality, it is hardly surprising that they gave no name to it. But in fact they did give it a name, for it can be called efficient causality, in the sense that a king may be called the efficient cause of a law, although the law itself is not a thing which has physical existence, but is merely what they call a 'moral entity'. Again, there is no need to ask how God could have brought it about from eternity that it was not true that twice four make eight, and so on; for I admit this is unintelligible to us. Yet on the other hand I do understand, quite correctly, that there cannot be any class of entity that does not depend on God; I also understand that it would have been easy for God to ordain certain things such that we men cannot understand the possibility of their being otherwise than they are. And therefore it would be irrational for us to doubt what we do understand correctly just because there is something which we do not understand and which, so far as we can see, there is no reason why we should understand. Hence we should not suppose that eternal

truths ‘depend on the human intellect or on other existing things’; they depend on God alone, who, as the supreme legislator, has ordained them from eternity.

From *Discourse on the Method*:

CSM I 132, Part Five:

Further, I showed what the laws of nature were, and without basing my arguments on any principle other than the infinite perfections of God, I tried to demonstrate all those laws about which we could have any doubt, and to show that they are such that, even if God created many worlds, there could not be any in which they failed to be observed.

*Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*:

CSM I 299:

We should note that even though the rule, ‘Whatever we can conceive of can exist’, is my own, it is true only so long as we are dealing with a conception which is clear and distinct, a conception which embraces the possibility of the thing in question, since God can bring about whatever we clearly perceive to be possible

CSM I 306:

But all the arguments which I adduced for this purpose reduce to two. The first is that, as I have shown, we have a conception or idea of God which is such that if we attend to the idea closely and thoroughly examine the issue in the way I have explained, we shall recognize, simply from this scrutiny, that it is not possible that God does not exist, since existence is contained in the concept of God – and not just possible or contingent existence, as in the ideas of all other things, but absolutely necessary and actual existence.



## VITA

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 Descartes *with Michael LeBuffe*  
 Mathematical Logic *with Robin Smith*  
 Modal Logic *with Max Cresswell*  
 Metaphysics *with Chris Menzel*  
 Albert Camus *with John McDermott*